Changing on the Fly

cacophonous-noise

Life With Derek

Complete

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Summary

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Description:

But on that victory lap he finds himself wishing it was still high school, cause when he looks up into the stands, among the thousands of faces, there is one he never sees. / Dasey, Future fic. / Now complete.

Chapter 1

So, he's trying to be humble in his post game locker room interview. But his whole team is on cloud nine pulling faces behind the men with the microphones, and the blood coursing through his veins is like Niagara Falls. And that goal he pulled out of his ass in the last five seconds in overtime? Well, really. It *was* nothing short of a miracle. One second he was screaming at his left wing to take the shot, and the next, he finds the puck trapped by his own stick. He thinks he sees an opening and Derek takes the shot, figuring no one else was going to anyway.

Then, next thing he knows, the opposition's goalie is on the ground and his teammates are in his face, sticks in the air, and the cheering in the arena around him—so loud he can't hear a thing.

"Well, you know," he's saying to the interviewer, 'when no one else can get the puck where it needs to be, sometimes I just gotta skate over there and put it in the net.' He smiles, "No, really. It was all of us on the offensive line, in the zone, passing it back and forth until someone found a scoring lane." His jersey is soaked, and his hair is plastered to his forehead. Derek drags his fingers through his hair and chuckles, "Guess I just got lucky tonight." Eyes meet the camera, self-deprecating smile, and cut.

Twenty minutes ago, he was taking his victory lap around the rink, player of the game theme song ripping out of the speakers. Really, it couldn't have gone better if he scripted the entire game himself. They were down when it was 1 to 0, and again when it was 2 to 1. They tied the game again, and the fans were on the edges of their seats for the entirely of the last period. Then they go into overtime, and everything is riding on last next five minutes. Coach pulls all of the defensemen, and then it's the four of them staring down the opposing net, with a goalie who's been matching them shot for shot. He hears the music like a march home from battle, and he knows, like he's always known, that he was born for the NHL.

But on that victory lap, when he should be all smiles and handshakes with the fans, he finds himself wishing it was still high school, cause when he looks up into the stands, whether it's after a win or a mind numbing loss, home or away, among the thousands of faces, there is one he never sees.

…

"You're a hockey fan now?" her best friend, Kate, who has somehow managed to get her hands on a spare key to Casey's apartment comes barreling though the front door. Casey herself looks up lazily from her position on the couch. "No, not really. Nothing else was on."

"So then you flip on the home shopping network or something."

"And depress myself with all the things I can't afford? Yeah, I've had enough masochism after my last date with whoever that prick was you tried to set me up with."

"Oh, so what. He was a fine piece of ass, and you, missy, haven't had a night off since your boss put you on that new assignment, chasing around that tennis player last month,"

Kate throws down her purse on the kitchen counter and joins Casey on the couch. “Like anyone in New York even gives two shits about tennis. You should really get the hell out of here and into some guy’s bed.”

“Just so you can steal my apartment for the evening? Roommate’s bad habit acting up again?”

“She says she’s depressed at how fat Lindsey looked hosting SNL last week. I tried to tell her it was just all the Botox, but she won’t believe me. Now all my Reese’s peanut butter cups are missing and she’s crying herself to sleep. It’s a nightmare—the both of us pretending like we don’t know.”

Casey rolls her eyes, “Really, you should be getting the poor girl some help, not trashing her like last month’s issue of Cosmo.”

“Well, we can’t all be little Miss with a minor in Psychology.”

“Whole lot of good that did me too, since I’m chasing around athletes for a living, trying to string together heartwarming stories about their latest match. I swear, if I have to write about one more over-privileged white girl from Connecticut,” she threatens, and then loses steam. “I just thought I’d be doing something a little more interesting with a degree in Literature.”

Kate laughs, “What about that idea for a novel you told me about?”

“Dead end. The characters just got up and left me. I kept putting them in depressing situations.”

“Ugh.” Kate sigh, over dramatic, as always, “Look at the two of us. It’s Friday night. We live in New York Fricking City, and we’re watching hockey.”

“Oh, hey. It’s career research. I could be writing about one of these buffoons next.”

Kate laughs, deep and low and kind of haunted. “God help us all.”

On the television, the buzzer goes off, signaling the end of the second period. The network switches to what’s going on in the rest of the league to fill the fifteen minute break. Casey launches off the couch and propels herself into the kitchen. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Wine,” Kate demands, “We may not be going out, but it’s the damn weekend. Give me some of the good stuff.”

“I got two buck chuck from Trader Joe’s.”

“That’ll do.”

Casey busies herself pulling wine glasses from off the top of the fridge, cursing that she can’t afford a place bigger than four hundred and a half square feet. She remembers when she moved here, fresh off the campus of Queen’s. She had hopes and dreams then.

“Oh,” Kate cat-calls from the couch. “Lookee here at this one; he’s kinda sexy.”

“Still got all his teeth, then?” Casey doesn’t even turn around.

“Hah-hah,” Kate drolls, “No, really. Get a look at him.”

Casey scoops up the wine glasses from the counter and glances up at the television.

“Case?” Kate turns round when her friend doesn’t answer.

All of the color has drained from her face, and one of the wine glasses falls from Casey’s hands, bouncing like a comedy sketch off the linoleum floor. The wine splashes up, staining the bottom of her jeans.

“Casey? Something wrong?”

It’s been five and a half years, and his smirk is exactly the same.

…

The boyfriend has totally wrangled me into the world of hockey, and I just can’t keep the bunnies from biting my butt about Derek and Casey. So, let’s see where this one goes, and please, do please push that pretty little purple button and leave me a review. It’ll make my day!

Chapter 2

"Dude, slide another one down to Venturi, man deserves it after tonight, doesn't he?" Matt, his left wing, is shouting toward the bartender. Then there is another beer in his fist, a girl clutching at his wrist, and that's the last thing he really remembers about that night.

He wakes up the next morning in an empty bed, figuring that one of the boys called him a cab home and he'll have to trek back to the bar later on to retrieve his car. He rolls over, after a glance at the clock, intending to sleep through the last fifteen minutes before his alarm goes off. But he lands in something that crinkles suspiciously like notebook paper. Groggily, he pulls the page out from underneath his shoulder.

In loopy, fairly ditzy handwriting, it reads: "Lovely to get to know you last night, Der. Hope we can do each other again sometime." She's also included her phone number and several hearts drawn after her name.

Right, he thinks as he falls back asleep, that'll be the day.

He wakes up the second time when he's back in the locker room, half his practice gear on, trying to lace up his left skate on his right foot. Matt slams down next to him on the bench. Derek drops his laces, hand finding its way up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Rough night, Venturi?"

"You could say that," Derek sighs, and looks up at Matt, "and you would know. I seem to remember a very busty redhead capturing your attention after I lost count of the beers."

"Well, you know," Matt bumps Derek on the shoulder, "Maybe I didn't have the moves on the ice last night, but she sure wasn't complaining about the moves in the bed."

"Spare me the dirty details, Matt. I can barely keep down my breakfast as is."

"Oh, you're just sore cause you couldn't seal the deal with Blondie."

"Shove off, Matt," Derek pulls the note out of his bag at his feet and passes it to Matt. "I scored all right, *and* I got the winning goal."

Matt whistles low in his throat, "Gonna see her again?"

Derek rolls his eyes. "Please, I'd like a bit more of a challenge, wouldn't you?"

"I dunno," Matt disagrees, "with an ass like hers?"

"Run of the mill, Matty. Now shove off for real this time, get your gear on."

"Venturi," Coach barks from the doorway of the locker room. "Ass in my office, we got something to discuss."

Derek bends back over to resume trying to lace up his skates, "Yeah, in a sec, Coach."

"Now, D," Coach insists, "Ya don't need your skates."

…

Kate and Casey are at the coffee pot closest to their section in the last few minutes before they're expected to be at their desks.

"It's your last day with the priss tennis player today, isn't it?

"And a happy day it is, too," Casey takes a sip of her coffee and then starts, "Time flies when you're having fun. We better get back to our desks. They'll be coming through with the morning roundup soon."

Kate sighs, "You're right. Back to the grind."

"See you for lunch?"

Kate nods and walks the other direction.

Two minutes back at her station and Casey's putting the final touches on her portrait of Madison Grace, Connecticut's finest to hit the court since, well, since the finest last season. Casey rolls her eyes, no. That wouldn't do as an ending. The magazine would never forgive her for that.

"McDonald," her boss, snaps on his way past her desk, "come with me."

"Yeah, I'll meet you in your office, Tom." Casey grabs her notebook off the corner of her desk and tucks a pen into the ponytail at the back of her head. She rushes after her boss and follows him into his office.

"Can you get the door, McDonald?"

"Sure," she obliges and sits herself across the desk from him. "I was just putting the finishing touches on the story about Ms. Grace if that's what you're looking for."

"Hmm?" Tom looks up from his notes and meets her eyes, 'Oh, that. Yes, I'm sure you did a lovely job spinning her wealthy upbringing into a story for the ages,' he smiles. "I wish I could say I was sorry for sticking you with that one, but, you do write them so well, so I'm not."

Casey smiles, "I understand, Tom."

"Well, anyway," he clasps his hands across the top of his desk. "I've got your next assignment. The city's getting a new hockey player, and they want a whole profile done on him. He's got quite a record, and they're very pleased to have him."

Casey can't help it, she laughs.

"Sorry, is that not going to work?"

"No, Tom, you misunderstand. I'm just so glad to get out of Connecticut," she could explain why she was really laughing, but Casey doesn't want to waste Tom's time, "So, what's his story?"

…

"What's going on, Coach?" Derek asks jovially the second he's through the door.

“You should sit, Venturi.”

“Ah, alright,” Derek pushes some gear off the chair across from Coach’s desk and takes a seat. “Gotta be honest there, you’re kinda making me nervous.”

Coach smiles, but if Derek didn’t know better he’d say that the older man looked upset. “I’ve really enjoyed having you on my team Venturi, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, Coach. It’s been great. I think I’ve really improved and it’s probably mostly thanks to you.”

“I just don’t want you to blame me when I give you the news, Venturi. ’Cause this is from the owners, not me.”

“Coach, just spit it out already, I’m sure it can’t be that bad.”

“That’s just it, D. It’s the worst news I’ve got all season.”

…

“He’s an up and comer from the Maple Leafs; he’s had a huge first season. Rumor has it that the Rangers paid through the nose to get him. So the kid’s probably got a huge ego on him.” Tom slides a manila folder across the desk. ‘But that’s nothing you can’t handle,’ Tom says with a wink, “His name is Eric or Derek or something like that.”

One hand on the folder, Casey sputters, almost choking on her own spit. “Derek, uh, Derek Venturi?”

…

“Bull*shit.*” Derek shouts, slamming his fists down on Coach’s desk. “They didn’t even think to consult me? This is my career after all!”

“I know it’s not exactly as the best time, since you’ve been on a roll, but look, D. New York noticed, and they wanted you, bad.”

“Bad enough the Leafs would just give me away?”

“Derek, it wasn’t my decision. All they saw was the numbers on the bottom line, we’d be getting their draft pick as well as our own and they’ve given us three second string players to help ease the transition. As far as the owners were concerned, there was no saying no to letting you go.”

“When do I leave?”

“You can practice with us today, then you can take a couple of days to get your stuff together, and say your goodbyes, but New York is expecting you by the end of the week.”

Derek runs his fingers through his hair, “This is bullshit.”

“I know, D. Ya want me to tell the team or are you gonna make the announcement?”

“I guess I’d better do it, huh?”

Coach nods, “Chin up, Venturi. They’ve got amenities and perks like you wouldn’t believe over in New York. By the end of the month, you won’t even remember us.”

“They could give me twice the money I’m making now and my pick of all the women in the country and I’d still be pissed about leaving here.”

“You always just hit it right on the mark, don’t ya, D?” Coach pushes some papers across the desk. “Here’s your new contract. They’re gonna want you to sign it ASAP.”

Derek crosses his arms over his chest, “And if I refuse?”

“Ya know how this works, kid. You gotta sign.”

“To think I thought I’d be making my own decisions once I got to the big leagues.”

“Didn’t we all, D. Didn’t we all.”

Derek signs the contract, however reluctantly, and meets his Coach in the eyes. “Now what?”

“Well, they’re paying for airfare and all of that, and they’ll set you up at the Four Seasons until you can get settled. It’s not close enough so you can walk to the Garden, but I suppose they figure you’ll be able to afford cab fare on your new salary, so…” He receives a half-hearted chuckle from Derek and then continues. “Then they’ll probably set you up with a real estate agent to find you more permanent accommodations, and then, well. You start your new life.”

“As a New Yorker,” Derek swallows. “*Shit.*”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think your issue was with the city itself, not with the trade at all.”

“You don’t know who’s in New York City, Coach.”

…

Is New York City big enough for the two of them? It’s Derek and Casey, so it seems that only time will tell. I see that hit counter going up, but the reviews remain unmatched. That pretty little button’s just calling your name, isn’t it? Please and thank you, and I’d absolutely love it if you left a review. Salt of life for us writers it is, haha, and thank you again!

Chapter 3

He figures he should probably not pull a Casey and actually tell his family before he jumps ship for America. But it's definitely not a conversation he's looking forward to. Derek swallows his apprehension, however, and dials the house number.

"Nora!" he says when she answers, "How are you?"

"It's a busy as ever, Derek. But you know that. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I thought I'd drop by for dinner tonight, if the fridge is well stocked enough to handle me," he jokes.

"Well, it much easier since Ed and Lizzie moved off to college and Robbie hasn't hit the hungry teenager stage yet, so I think we'll be able to manage."

"Great," Derek agrees, "So, six o'clock? Seven?"

"Make it seven, Derek," Nora says, laughing.

"See you then," he says, and hangs up his phone.

…

Casey and Kate are at a bar. It's 5:05 p.m. on a Tuesday evening, but Casey couldn't do this alone. It's empty, save for them and a few working men too tired from the day in the sun, up on the scaffolding, to even bother trying to pick them up.

"The hell did Tom do? Fire you?"

"Worse," Casey slams her head into the bar, a little too hard for comfort. Then she curses.

"I'm all for helping you out of a bad spot, Case, but I'm gonna need a little more information than that."

"The folder," Casey manages in between massive sighs, "In my purse. Just see for yourself."

Kate spreads the file out on the bar, "Is that—" she flips another few pages, "Casey, this is —" Kate starts laughing, hysterical rolls of laughter that threaten to take her off the barstool, onto the sticky floor with the rest of the filth thrown down there. "It's sexy hockey player— Oh, I am so jealous."

Casey lifts her forehead off of the bar top, "I never told you about the reason I moved to New York, did I?"

"Big hopes and dreams of being a NYT bestseller like the rest of us at the sports mag, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I could have done that home, in my own country. It probably would have been better, too. That's where I had all my contacts, did all my networking. No. That's not the point.

Kate grins, “Does it have anything to do with sexy hockey player?”

To which Casey lets out another shuddering sigh, “It has everything to do with sexy hockey player. Only, and get this one thing straight, he’s not sexy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that, he’s—”

“Not sexy!” Casey shouts.

“Then, what is he?”

“He’s my brother,” Casey swallows, ‘*Step* brother,’ she amends. “He’s my step brother—as in his Dad went and married my Mom, as in been the bane of my entire existence since I was fifteen years old. As in the newest member of the New York Rangers, who will be here, in my country, by the end of the week. As in Derek. He’s stupid Derek. That’s who.”

“And since you haven’t mentioned your famous hockey playing step brother before now, I’m gonna guess you two don’t get along?

“Kate,” Casey looks her best friend, pleadingly in the eyes. “I can’t see him again. I can’t.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad, dear.”

“Maybe not, but we’ve blown the whole thing so far out of proportion—”

“All the more reason to use this as an excuse to get a little reacquainted.”

Casey curls her hands into fists atop the bar. “We’re acquainted enough, thank you.”

“Casey,” Kate says, “I know you. And if you made such a rash decision to leave Canada as it sounds like it was, then I’m sure you have regrets.”

“Regrets are one thing. I never thought I’d get a chance to fix them.”

…

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” George looks concerned, and a little bit angry after Derek drops the news, “I mean, you’ll be in New York, practically next door neighbors with—”

“I don’t really have a choice, Dad.” This, Derek thinks to himself, is the very reason he did not want to bring it up in front of Marti and Robbie. But he supposes something about dinner out of the blue with his family just screamed I-have-big-and-life-altering-news, and after several prods from both Nora and his Dad, Derek had to give in. So far, Robbie has been the only one excited for him, gushing about how ‘That’s so awesome!’ and “They’re one of the best teams in the league this year, D. You must be really good! Even better than I thought!” Marti, well, she smiled and congratulated him, like she was trying to be happy. But more than anything, she just looked sad. Then Nora asked the two of them to take dessert into the next room so they could have an “adult conversation” with Derek.

“Honestly, Nora. I’m practically an adult myself,” Marti protests, “I can stay and listen! He’s my brother!”

“Marti,” George chastises, “I thought we were past that. We’re all one family now.”

“Except for Casey,” Marti mutters under her breath.

“What was that?” George asks.

“Nothing, nothing,” Marti grumbles, as she rises to leave the table. As she passes Derek she says, “Sorry, big bro. I was gonna try and run interference for you.”

Derek smiles, but George is less pleased, “Martina Venturi. Derek can handle himself now, thank you very much.”

Once the table is clear, Nora chimes in. “Honestly, Derek, can’t you get them so reverse the trade?”

“Trust me, I wish I could, but that’s really not how it works—”

“But, you’re the player,” Nora interrupts, “Shouldn’t they have consulted you about this?”

“I guess they think it’s for my own good, like it will be a huge advancement for my career. Which, really, it will be.”

“But so far away from your family, Derek.”

Derek sighs, “I’ll get on okay in New York. She’s managed to these last few years.”

“We don’t know that.” George says.

Only because you never talk to her, Derek thinks. Now is not the time to bring this up again, he reminds himself. No good will come of that.

“And besides, her being there isn’t exactly a good reason for your going. We thought the time apart had done you well.”

Yeah, well, thinks Derek, if we’re being honest about my subsequent life since then, sleeping with every bitch that walks, then, yes. It’s been going very well. “There’s nothing I can do about it. By Friday, I’ll be a New Yorker,” he rises to clear his plate, “and honestly, I expected more from you two. It’s inconvenient, yeah, it being the middle of the season and all, but it’s a huge compliment that New York wanted me bad enough that they couldn’t wait until next season.” He makes his way back into the kitchen.

Nora, at least, has the decency to look chastened.

“Derek,” his Dad tries, “We’re sorry, it’s just such a—”

But Derek silences him with a wave of his hand. He stands in the doorway between the kitchen and the eating area, “Maybe you could take a page from your Marti’s book and try to at least pretend to be happy for me.”

…

Later that night, Casey is mercifully alone in her apartment, well, alone is a relative term when one has an envelope the size of an elephant in the room.

…

Marti chases him out the door as he’s leaving. She shuts it behind her and grabs his wrist.

“I know that was harsh, but they will come around, you know.”

“And what about you?” he asks, quietly, “You didn’t really tell me what you think.”

“Dad and Nora won’t like what I have to say,” she admits. “I had to wait.”

Derek smiles, “That’s a relief. I thought I’d be off to America without a proper goodbye from my favorite little sister.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little harsh to Lizzie?”

“Not Casey?”

“Please,” Marti says, “Lizzie and Ed may have been the spying schemers, but I noticed. Casey will never be your sister. When the two of you argue—”

“Argued,” he corrects. “I haven’t spoken to her since—”

“—when you argued,” she plows over her brother, “it was like you were the only two people in the world. Not even your favorite little Smarti could pull your attention away.”

“Smarti—” he says, a bit of pain in his voice.

“Oh, shut it, Smerek. I got over it a long time ago. I know you love me; I’m your sister, and you have to. But she’s different.”

He swallows, “Yeah, I just wish…” he trails off.

“That Dad and Nora would get out of your way, well. I don’t give a shit—”

“Smarti!” he hisses.

“I’m a teenager now,” she reminds him. “It’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

“I know, I’m just not used to it,” he grins, “You gotta go easy on me, Smarts.”

“Well, the point is, you two are going to be a whole country away from the parents. Get a little crazy, Smerek. I’m sure she misses you.”

Derek rubs his face, sighing. “She’s not even going to know I’m there.”

“She will if you tell her.”

“Well, I’m not going to.”

“Look, I don’t know what happened between the two of you, none of us kids do.”

“I can’t get in to it, especially not with you. There are some things about me you really don’t need to know.”

“Whatever it is,” Marti lowers her tone and speaks with wisdom Derek never expected his little sister to possess. “I’m sure by now it’s just been blown totally out of proportion. Treat this as a fresh start.”

“We need more than a fresh start. We need amnesia, a full brain wipe, and an apocalypse.”

“Tell her you’re there, Derek. Or I will.”

He nods his head, resigned to his youngest sister’s will.

“And if you don’t fly me out to New York City as a graduation present, I will never forgive you.”

Derek smirks, typical Venturi charm, twisting someone else's misery into one's own gain. "We'll see about that."

She punches his upper arm. "And no matter what happens with the new team, with your new city, with her," Marti gives him a meaningful look, "I will always love you, Smerek."

"I love you too, Smarti."

Marti presses up on her tip toes to give her eldest brother a kiss on his cheek, "And I'm really going to miss you. A lot."

"Me too," Derek pulls her into a hug. "The Leafs are gonna be so sorry they let me go."

"There's the Derek I know and love." She lets go of him and meets his eyes, "Go get 'em, Ranger." She salutes, and disappears into the house.

…

Look at cute little Derek, thinking Casey has no idea what's coming for her.

I want to thank everyone for the support. It's great to see so many people adding Trade *to their alert list and even to their favorite stories list already, after only a few chapters. And thank you for the reviews, too! If you would be so kind as to keep them coming… it's just the best to read what you're thinking and what you have to say.*

Chapter 4

A/N: *I know, I know. I upped the rating. Cue OHMYGOD. (No, really, it's just for some foul language.)*

And, without further ado, I give thee Trade: *Chapter 4*…

…

Matt, the saint, up before 10 am on a Wednesday, drives him to the airport. He's only got a few bags, the rest of Derek's stuff is being shipped—the stuff he needs, anyway, of which there is very little. He donated most of his big stuff and he thought about taking his TV, but figured it would just be easier to get a new one on the other side of the border. So he showed up on Edwin's doorstep the evening before with the television, gift-wrapped complete with a giant bow and the two said a quick goodbye. Then some of the guys from the Leafs took him out, last night on the town style.

He woke up alone on Matt's couch this morning, surrounded by suitcases and with no note from any escaping lovers, fairly sure that none had accompanied him home the night before.

Back in the car, en route to the airport, Matt asks, "You're gonna be okay on the other side?"

"I'm a big boy, Matty," Derek says, "The real question is if you're gonna be able to score any goals without me."

"Oh, I'll manage. I've been scoring goals since long before I met you."

"Sure, I'll believe it when I see it."

They pull the car into short-term parking, and Matt helps Derek get all of his bags into the airport. Outside of security, Derek stops and looks at his friend, "Matty, are you crying?"

"What? No," he says, as he rubs at his eyes with his right hand. "But I'm gonna miss ya, bro."

"Well, start playing a little better, and maybe New York will take you away too," Derek tries to lighten the mood.

"Course. I'll be following in your footsteps within the month."

Outside of the security clearance area, Matt and Derek hug, awkwardly, triangle style, for a second and a half, just long enough for a single pat on the other one's back.

"Look me up if you're ever in the Big Apple, Matt. I mean it."

"I will, D," he says as Derek makes his way toward the line. "See ya around."

"See ya, Matt."

…

“He’s going to be in town later today, from what I’ve heard,” Tom explains to Casey the next day at work. “So you should try and set up your first interview for sometime after his first practice, you know, give him some time to develop some first impressions about his new gig.”

Casey is nodding along with Tom, scribbling a few things down in her notebook, pretending like this isn’t really happening right now.

He releases her from his office, and she returns to her desk. As she rounds the corner of her cubicle, she spots a new take-out cup of coffee and a sample pack of chocolates from the shop in lobby of the magazine’s building.

“Kate,” she says to no one in particular, “Aren’t you a saint?”

Speak of the devil, “Figured you’d need a little pick me up after last night,” Kate says by way of explanation, clutching her own coffee cup. “So, when do you walk into the lion’s den?”

“Probably sometime this weekend. Tom wants us to get our exclusive in before anyone else can jump on him.”

“So, you’re just going to show up as a reporter like you two don’t even know each other?”

Casey looks at her toes, “That’s what I was thinking, yeah.”

“Casey,” Kate chides. “You know that’s a stupid idea. You’re not going to get any work done. I mean he knows you’re in town, so he’s had a little time to prepare, but you can’t just show up out of the blue like,” So, Mr. Venturi, what’s it like being a New York Ranger?”

“Well, why not?” Casey questions, rather petulantly.

…

He’d say even their jerseys are nicer, if he didn’t know that couldn’t possibly be true and if it didn’t make him sound like a priss. Less than 12 hours after he got off the plane yesterday evening, he’s sitting in the locker rooms somewhere deep inside Madison Square Garden.

The Ranger’s Coach, Jim, enters and walks straight toward Derek, “We’re putting you in the third line with Volkov and Crawford. You three can get to know each other before we start,” Coach directs his attention to the rest of the room and calls over Derek’s new line. Two guys, one blonde and rather slim and the other dark haired and tall as a horse, look up from their gear and make their way over.

Jim looks back to Derek, “You’ll continue to play as a center forward,” he explains.

“So I’ll be seeing plenty of ice time,”

“Of course. We didn’t pay all that money for you so you could warm the bench for us.”

Derek’s new linesmen join them. The dark haired one introduces himself first, “Vicktor Volkov,” he says, his accent faint, but distinctly Russian.

“And I’m Wes,” the other offers, “Wes Crawford.”

Derek introduces himself, and then there is a slight pause.

“Right, I’ll leave you boys to play nice,” Coach says, and then he addresses the entire locker room, “On the ice in five, boys.”

“Hey,” Wes leans in conspiratorially, “You started for the Leafs, right?”

“Yeah,” Derek says, nonchalant, “but they weren’t as strong a team, so…”

“No, no. That’s not what I’m saying,” Wes amends.

Derek crosses his eyebrows, “Okay, what are you saying?”

Vicktor jumps in, “That’s Wes’ way of saying we’re really excited to have you. We’re tired of being the third line.”

“And, since you were a starting forward, we figure we have a better chance now,” Wes explains.

Derek smiles, catching on, “Don’t worry, boys, I don’t intend to stay third string for long.”

Once out on the ice, it doesn’t take Derek long to figure out Wes’s strength. He might be smaller than himself and Vicktor, but he’s fast. Really fast. They are doing suicides to start, which gives Derek enough of a reason to think this team is more hard core than any one he’s been on previously, and Wes is skating circles around all of them, showing no sign of tiring. And Derek may not be captain of the team, but Wes and Vicktor definitely made him captain of their line, so to keep himself from actually committing suicide, he starts planning.

…

Casey reluctantly acknowledges that Kate probably has a point. It’s not a good idea to just go to the rink and pretend like they’re strangers. It really would not be fair.

Unfortunately, after she and Derek fell out, she deleted every trace of him. Of course, she still has his phone number memorized, but her procrastinating mind has convinced herself that he’s changed it by now. She knows the chance of him changing said phone number is slim, but she hasn’t talked to Lizzie in a while, and she will definitely have the correct number, so she takes her lunch break to catch up with her younger sister.

“I assume you heard the news,” Lizzie says instead of hello.

Casey sighs.

“And how are you doing?” Lizzie softens her tone.

“Do you have Derek’s phone number?”

“You’re gonna call him?” she asks, clearly excited.

“It’s not like that, Liz.”

“Well, I mean, I just assumed you’d pretend like he was still in Canada. I don’t really understand Manhattan, but your chances of crossing paths are pretty slim, aren’t they?”

Again, Casey sighs.

“Aren’t they?” Lizzie presses.

“See, at the magazine, we cover New York sports teams, Liz. Derek is now a New York sports player.”

“No,” Lizzie says, horrified.

“We have a meeting scheduled this weekend, the day before his first game.”

“Casey, you can’t just show up there out of the blue, I mean the boy gets nauseous with regular nerves, if you walk back into his life without warning—Casey, you’ll ruin his career! He won’t even be able to play.”

“I know, Liz. That’s why I want to call him. Meet up beforehand, so it’s less of a shock on Saturday. So, if you’ve got his phone number…”

“It’s the same one he’s always had,” she says dismissively but lists it for Casey’s benefit anyway. “God, Casey, what are you going to say?”

“For once, I have no idea.”

“Oh boy,” Lizzie says. “Listen, I have to get back to class, but if you need anything. I mean anything, you can always call me.”

“Yeah, Liz. Thanks. Talk to you soon?”

“Yep. Love you, Case.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

Casey hangs up and looks down at the phone number she’s scribbled on her hand.

…

“Damn,” Derek swears, back in the locker room, the hardest hockey practice of his life finally over. “I’m not going to be able to move in tomorrow.”

Vicktor laughs, “Russian remedy, Venturi.”

Wes joins in on his laughter, “Yeah, we know this great place down in the Village.”

“Lots of vodka, lots more women,” Vicktor says, “Wanna come with?”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees, “Though I’m sure I’m gonna regret it in the morning.”

“Nah, man,” Vicktor claps him on the shoulder, “You’ll feel good as new.”

…

She hasn’t even spoken to him yet, and already Derek is driving her to alcoholism. Casey went home after work and stared at her hand for a full three hours before she gave up, realizing that tonight, however important it was to call him, was not the night. So she’s back at the bar, although this time, she is without Kate. Fortunately, it’s late on a Thursday evening, and she’s not the only one who’s decided to start the weekend early.

…

By the time they head down to the subway—Derek gets a crash course in the MetroCard system—a few more of his new teammates have joined them. And this must be a weekly

event or something because all of the guys, not just Wes and Vicktor, know how to get there.

…

The bartender slides her cranberry vodka across the bar, and tries to engage her in conversation, but Casey's not biting.

…

"The great thing about coming down to the Village," Wes is explaining to Derek, "is that people don't care about hockey. We get to be regular guys down here."

"You make it sound like it's a different country," Derek says.

"Trust me," Wes fist bumps his shoulder, "It practically is."

Derek shrugs, "If you say so."

"You'll see. You haven't been living here long enough to realize it, but you will see," Wes promises.

Their group rounds another corner; here, the streets aren't as wide as they are uptown, and more often than not, they are cobblestoned rather than paved.

A few steps up the block, Vicktor stops. "We're here."

…

There is a bit of a ruckus at the front door that distracts Casey from her pathetic musings and hand staring. Just as she looks up, a bunch of big guys walk into the bar. She looks away. Dimly, Casey thinks she should call Kate. It's a rare occasion there are more men than women in this place.

…

Derek looks around. It's quaint, but Vicktor was right when he said there were lots of women; he figures the girls outnumber the boys two to one. Their group does a little to even the ratio, but not enough. Not that he's complaining.

"I'm gonna grab a drink," Derek tells Wes.

"Not wasting any time, huh?"

"My whole body hurts, I need something to numb the pain."

"Yeah, I hear ya. We usually grab the table in the back."

…

Next to Casey, a man steps up to the bar. "Jack and coke," he orders, in a voice that sounds like home.

"There's no way," Casey mutters, too quiet to be heard. She swallows, braces herself, and looks up. He's cleaned up, less sweaty and more put-together, but he looks the same as he did on the television: proud jaw, mop of brown hair. She can't help it. She swears, really loud, which catches his attention.

Derek looks away from the bartender mixing his drink, and down into Casey's eyes. He blinks several times; his stomach hits the floor and then he finds his voice, "Holy fucking shit."

…

Ah, breathe. Sorry this update took so much longer than the last few. Spring break is over, and unfortunately, I do have classes that occupy much of my day. Anyway, I want to thank everyone for adding Trade *to their story alert lists, favorite story lists, and even adding me to their author alert lists! Does a girl real proud. But my absolute favorite is when you leave a review! Even if it's just to tell me that I suck, or you want less hockey and more Dasey. So, go ahead. Push that pretty little button and I promise I'll be motivated to update that much faster. :)*

Chapter 5

Thanks again to everyone who's reading, and alerting and squeeing, and especially to those of you who are reviewing! And, without further ado…

…

Derek looks away from the bartender mixing his drink, and down into Casey's eyes. He blinks several times; his stomach hits the floor and then he finds his voice, "Holy fucking shit."

"Five and a half years and that's all you have to say to me?" Casey is impressed that not only has she successfully squashed a massive urge to run right now, but she has also managed to say something not completely stupid.

He sinks into the conveniently unoccupied barstool next to her, "Shit," he says again, "It's really you."

"Taken one too many hockey pucks to the head, eh?" she moves to reach up and tousle his hair, but immediately thinks better of it. She pauses, waiting for his returning insult; it doesn't come. "Of course it's me, dipshit."

"Why," he swallows, "why do I get the impression that you're not as surprised to see me as I am to see you?"

She chooses half truth, "I knew you were coming."

"Tonight? To this bar?"

"Well, no," she hedges, "and turns her attention to her drink. Wes' voice rises above the crowd from the back of the bar." Venturi, you coming?"

Derek whirls around, his own drink forgotten, "I-what?" he blinks, "In a-one-give me a second."

If she were in a position to feel superior right now, Casey would be enjoying the rare sight of flustered Derek. Unfortunately, all of her attention is currently focused on not screaming.

Derek eyes her suspiciously. "Why aren't you freaking the hell out?"

"I told you. I knew you were coming."

"But not now!" he's yelling so loudly, if people weren't drunk, they would stand up and take notice, as it is, the bartender keeps shooting him warning looks.

"Derek!" she grabs his hands, intending to calm him down, 'Derek, look.' But his grip is warm and her hands are dwarfed in his and it feels like home and comfort and not at all stressful. They lock eyes, and she feels calm, even though her heart is up, beating in her throat. Casey snaps her hands back to her side of the bar. "You know that interview you have scheduled Saturday? For the sports magazine in town?"

“How do you know about that?”

“I’m your interviewer.”

“No you’re not.”

“Derek, how else would I know about that?”

“You talked to our parents, or something, you’ve been following me, I don’t know, but there is no way you are interviewing me in two days after not seeing me for five years and you didn’t fucking tell me about it,” he fists his hands on the bartop; he wants to grab her and shake her. “What were you going to do? Just waltz in like nothing ever happened between us? What’s wrong with you, Head Case?”

She doesn’t want to laugh, but everything about this situation is easier now that she is laughing. And seeing Derek again, especially Derek dropping nicknames and insults-even if they’re not his usual ones-it’s almost like she can pretend like the last five years didn’t happen.

Derek, on the other hand, doesn’t find this nearly as funny as she does. “Why are you laughing?” he demands, and then grabs her by the shoulders, “What could possibly be so goddamn funny?”

It’s like fire, where his hands touch her. Not because his grip is too tight, but because it is not tight enough. Her breath slows, and she watches the muscles in his forearms roped and tight like sinew. They breathe in tandem then and around them, the bar, the concrete, the steel and the city, the country drops away. They only thing she feels are his fingers wrapped around her arms and his eyes burning into her lips.

They come together like magnetism, his forehead touching hers; his breath, heavy with whiskey, dances across her cheekbones. His grip has loosened and she closes her eyes against his cheek. Above the din, he cannot hear her, but Derek feels it when Casey moans into him, breath still so slow. She barely notices the pinch when he digs his fingernails into her triceps. His breath catches in his throat. She inhales and her chest is-is it?-just touching his. They move, noses touching, standing now, pulses pounding together, skin licked with flame.

“God, Case,” he rumbles deep within his chest, “I’ve missed you like a hole in the head,” he slides his hands down her back, and pulls her into him for a proper embrace. They are touching everywhere, from the knees to chests, to where her lips are tucked close into the hollow of his neck.

“Derek,” she intones, and his name is barely out of her mouth before the alarm bells start screaming in her head.

She pulls away, absolute horror painted all over her face. His heart drops, “Case, don’t—” he tries, reaching up to hold her face. They meet eyes, but he knows it’s futile because her decision will always be the same, and she’s already gone.

…

He slams his drink down on the boy’s table, and slides into a seat next to Wes. “Lose a conquest already?” Vicktor snarks from across the table.

Derek laughs easily, “No, she just had somewhere to be,” he lies, effortlessly, “She was real apologetic about it.” Really, he reasons, no one else needs to be brought into this drama. Lean back, flash a smile, and he has all of them fooled.

“Sure,” one of the other guys, who Derek believes is called Michael, cuts in, “That’s what they all say.”

Derek smiles, “Yeah, but they don’t all give you their numbers before they go.”

…

Kate is laughing, absolutely hysterical, “It’s like the universe took the responsibility away from you.”

“That’s not what’s important!” Casey’s voice is shrill. “We’re freaking out about the fact that now he knows I’m here and I can’t avoid him anymore if I want to.”

“No, I’m freaking out about how exponentially stupid you are.”

“What am I supposed to-what?”

“Why the hell did you run away?”

“Because,” and she starts spewing her diatribe about everything that is wrong between the two of them.

“Bullshit, Casey. Come on, you know its bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“Casey, what the hell happened between the two of you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then,” Kate demands, “why did you run away?”

“It was all too intense; we were in the middle of the bar for chrissake, acting like we were __”

“No, Casey. Why did you run away?”

She screams, exasperated. “Because I was—”

“Casey.” Her friend stares her down.

Casey surprises herself and answers honesty, “Because that was the last thing I expected.”

“What?”

“For him to be so passionate!” her voice breaks, ‘Still, after… after all this time,’ she hiccups, “he could just lo-look at me and whole world was g-gone,” she is sobbing openly now, “I was so..so sure he would have m-moved on.”

“Casey,” Kate reaches over and pulls her friend into a bone-crushing hug, “why?”

“Derek..Derek d-doesn’t pine.”

“Apparently he pines after you, honey.”

Which does not really help, Casey only cries harder.

“So, what are you going to do?”

…

He does not know what he was thinking when he agreed to dance with this woman, all giggles and hair tosses. Most likely, it was something along the lines of, if you don’t get over her now, you are never going to. Only thing is, he’s been telling himself that for about twelve years. And isn’t it too late already? he wonders, hand on the hips of this stranger, this stranger who moves like glitter in his hands, who’s he’s not even paying attention to.

The music changes into something a little more sensual with a salsa beat. She cozies closer, and he’s too lost in thoughts going a thousand miles a minutes to even notice.

If it has been that long since he’s seen her, and she can still spin him around like a top, surely they’re never going to change. He steels himself against that line of inquiry and tries to concentrate on Anna or Ashley or Abigail or whatever her name is, because really, it’s unfair how he’s making all of her intricate dance moves go to waste. And he thinks, maybe for a second, that he can just lose himself and forget, but then Anna or Ashley or Abigail stares up at him with big blue eyes, and all he can see is Casey.

…

After Kate has determined 24-hour Casey-watch is less than necessary, she leaves her alone, promising to meet for coffee at work in the morning.

“And you call me if anything is wrong, okay?”

“Kate,” Casey glares at her friend, who is still leaning against the door, ‘Thank you for coming, I’m fine,’ and then she smiles sweetly, “Now please leave.”

Kate laughs and shuts the door behind her, “Bye, Casey!”

She can put on the strongest face she wants, but the truth is that Casey is not okay. And it’s hard, because she thought she was over it. Had someone asked her a week ago, she would have said that Derek was ancient history, doomed until the rest of forever to be just another person in her family-her upside-down, Brady-bunched family, and nothing more.

But then she saw his face, his eyes-five years and he still looks at her in exactly the same way. And she can feel the bind of her inhibitions holding her back, but there is also something else there, a small voice in the back of her mind that tells her that this is a new city where no one knows who they are. They could have what they always wanted-or at the very least, they could try.

Casey flips on the television with a sense of calm; she knows what she has to do.

…

Anna Ashely Abigail is making quick work of Derek’s emotions, namely his libido. Most of the other guys have joined them on the dance floor by this point and there are only so many seconds he can stand, dancing, in this mosh pit of sexual competition. There are only so many times he can be rubbed from behind by a stranger and rubbed from the front by Triple A, before he has to pull someone close to release the goddamn tension. He hates himself every

second his hands are on her lower back and even more when she steps up to kiss him and he doesn't protest. And really, there are only so many different places she can touch him before he starts thinking that moving on from Casey wouldn't be so bad. Right?

…

Right?

Thank you thank you thank you to everyone for the reviews and the support. Please keep them coming.

Please?

Chapter 6

As always, thanks a bunches for all the alerts, favourites and reviews! Especially the reviews.

…

Wes is prattling on about some play or another he wants them to execute as the leave the locker room after practice Saturday morning. Derek is not paying attention, as the second he steps out the door, he is struck with the overwhelming feeling that something is wrong.

Wes whistles, “Wonder who she’s here for. We never get lady reporters.”

Derek stops; he stares.

“Especially not pretty lady reporters.”

Without thinking, Derek pulls back his fist and lands it squarely on Wes’ shoulder.

“Whoa, the fuck is your damage, Venturi?”

Derek doesn’t answer. He walks, determined, into the glass-walled conference room where she sits, “You were serious?”

She looks up disdainfully from her notebook, “This is my job. I’m always serious about my job.”

“You’re really a sports reporter?” he stifles the urge to laugh, and not very well.

Casey rolls her eyes, “Athletic journalist,” she corrects.

“Same thing,” he takes the seat closest to her.

“Is not!”

“What ever lets you sleep at night, Princess.”

Some part of her wants to smile, but more of her is outraged, “Well, lah-dee-fucking-dah to you, Derek,” she looks at him haughtily from her chair. ‘Not all of us land our dream job smack out of college. Some of us work, pay the bills,’ she’s counting the steps off on her fingers, “Most of us have to save our hobbies for the sidelines.”

Casey leans in toward him, “I bet you think I’m here because I want to be,” her tone is wicked, “After last night, even after you went home with another warm body, I bet you were thinking that I couldn’t wait to get back here and have another go with you.”

Derek does not have the decency to look chastised.

She stands, walks to the glass wall that look out over the receiving room. “Do you know what it’s like to be miserable every goddamn day just to keep a roof over your head?” she throws her arms up and whirls around to look at him.

Derek notices her wild eyes, her erratic breathing. Still, he says nothing, getting the feeling she's not really looking for an answer.

"No, of course you wouldn't."

He looks back at her, stares really, not at all intimidated, face to face with the eye of the storm.

Yes, if she had to, she'd say he was amused. "Cause, right. This is exactly what I want to be doing with my life." The more she talks, the closer to him she gets. "Spending day after fucking day with entitled, sexist 'roid ragers."

He was amused before, Derek is full-on grinning now.

"You know what, asshat?" she says, nearly nose-to-nose with a still-seated Derek. 'I don't need to do this. I know all about you. Derek Venturi,' she spits his name, "I can just imagine the ego trip it's been, being hand-picked by the best fucking team in the Eastern Conference." She is livid, smoking, on the verge of a break.

"What's the point of going through the motions, sitting here pretending?" she drops her voice to a vicious whisper, "I know everything there is to know, Derek."

He grabs her wrists then and pins her against the conference table. His breath is light, airy like mint today, but his touch is still on fire.

"Don't you dare."

She rips herself free and elbows him out of the way, "Watch me."

…

"So you do know the lady reporter then," Wes says as Derek stalks out of the conference room. "Really well, apparently."

Derek glares.

"C'mon, who is she?"

"She's interviewing me for *Sports Section*," his tone is curt.

"I'm not stupid. I know there's more to it than that."

"Drop it, Wes."

He starts to protest, but when he catches Derek's eye, he thinks this is what it must feel like to be the goal tender on the receiving end of one of Derek's slapshots. Wes coughs and quickly changes the subject. "Right, well—as I was saying. Vicktor has this fantastic behind-the-net game, so if you could just position yourself…"

Derek nods along, but he is not listening to a word Wes is saying. No. His whole being is still in that conference room, with the familiar venom in her eyes. He knows he should be a little bit nervous at the potential state of his career, since he seems to have put it all in her hands, but he's curious too.

…

“Uhoh,” Kate says, seeing Casey slam her bag onto her desk.”

“Coffee break,” she barks at her friend, “Now?”

“Yes, your highness.”

Casey fixes Kate with a withering look.

“Yeesh,” she objects, “It was a harmless joke.”

“I have an issue with being compared to royalty right now.” The pair makes their way back to the elevators.

“Oh… kay.”

“Derek,” Casey says by way of explanation.

“Derek called you ‘Your Highness’ today, didn’t he?”

“No, he just brought back his favorite nickname for me—the one he coined in our angst-ridden teenage days,” she sighs, “I thought he left it there, but apparently not. He called me *Princess*,” she elaborates.

Kate grins.

“Shut up. It’s not like that. It’s an insult. At least, now it is,” she adds darkly.

“So it didn’t go well.”

“He comes in, guns blazing,” she continues as If she hadn’t heard Kate. “And we just—I just, went off on him. And he stood there, all smugness and arrogance like—like he had done nothing wrong.”

“Casey, what has he done wrong?”

Casey cuts back in, “You know what? I don’t wanna talk about it. Can we just get our coffee and I’ll go upstairs and write this damn thing so I can finally be rid of him.” She steps up to order. “Grande caramel frappuccino.”

Kate sighs; she knows that is all she is going to get for now.

“Don’t sigh at me like that. I deserve a splurge.”

“Will that be all, ma’am?”

“Yes,” Casey says hastily. She hands over the money and moves to queue up in the next line.

“So do you want to grab a drink at Minnie’s tonight?” Kate steps up to order.

“I can’t go back there,” Casey dismisses.

“Yeah, venti espresso macchiato, please.”

“Even if he doesn’t go back—”

“Name please.”

“—all of his buffoon hockey friends—”

“Kate.”

“— are going to be there again. And besides,” Casey says, “I want to finish this damn article tonight.”

“Fair enough,” Kate answers, “I’ll go without you.”

“Hopeless,” Casey sighs.

“It’s Saturday. I’ve spent all morning at the office. If I’m not on cheer up Casey duty, I’m gonna find a nice boy to help cheer up Kate.”

…

Later that night at Minnie’s, Kate sits nursing a mojito alone at the bar. There is a basketball game on the tube that she’s idly paying attention to. One of the players, who has got to be twice the size of a normal person and then some crosses the court in three bounds and sinks a basket. A few people cheer, Kate rolls her eyes.

Some stools down, the guy drinking a scotch speaks up for the first time all night, “And the tall guy scores his thirty-seventh point of the game.”

“Too much damn offensive play,” Kate agrees, “No wonder the arena’s so empty. Boring.”

Down the bar, the guy smiles, “Not a b-ball fan, then?”

Kate shakes her head, “I’d have to sit in a booster seat to look any one of them in the eyes. But you,” she looks him up and down, “You’re plenty short enough. My name is Kate,” she extends her hand with a smile.

He reaches over to return the shake, “Hi, Kate,” and he slides into the stool next to her, “I’m Wes.”

…

Pretty purple button make a pretty happy writer. Thankies, thankies, thankies!

Chapter 7

Group hug to everyone who continues reading! Can we make the group hug of reviewers even bigger? It would mean a whole ton to me.

…

He reaches over to return the shake, "Hi, Kate," and he slides into the stool next to her, "I'm Wes."

"So, Wes." Kate says, "I think we should play a game."

He looks at her through the corner of his eyes. "You're trying to get me drunk."

"I resent the implication! My motives are nothing but pure."

"Oh, so it's not a drinking game?"

"I never said that."

We smiles, "So, how does this game work?"

"First you have to pick a team," she explains, gesturing to the basketball game still playing on the television.

"The Heat," he says without hesitation.

"No New York pride, then?"

"I share an arena with those boys; that's enough NYC pride to last a lifetime."

The remark is so casual, it takes a moment to process. She blinks, "You're a Ranger?"

He meets her eyes, "Shit. I don't usually go around telling that to people I've just met."

Kate cocks her head, "Really?"

"It tends to ruin things pretty quickly. Girls get, you know… starstruck? They start acting differently."

"Please," Kate rolls her eyes. "I interview sports stars for a living. Your job couldn't be more boring if you tried." Boring maybe, but not without its perks. It would certainly be perky to have an inside line on Wes' newest teammate and his very peculiar relationship to one Casey McDonald.

"Well," he says, a genuine smile spreading across his face. "Isn't that a relief?"

…

"McDonald," she hears Tom calls her cell phone Sunday morning, "I need to talk to you about this Venturi article. Is now a good time?"

She can't see his face and she can't read his tone, so Casey doesn't know what's coming. The whole piece flew out of her fingers last night in under an hour, like her brain had nothing to do with it. Then she gave it a once-over for typos and grammar, but hadn't given it much thought beyond those basics. The whole laissez-faire approach she was going for here was rather unlike her, in regards to everything, but especially in regard to her work. It was usually like drawing blood from a stone to get any article out of her head, and then after that? Several days of editing, tweaking, and reworking entirely. But this, well, it was effortless, more like Derek than her, really.

"So, what happened this weekend?"

"We met yesterday at the Garden for our interview, and then I typed it up last night to send to you," she says, glossing over everything her boss does not need to know.

"I can't believe you wrote this that quickly," he says, his tone curious, "But I have it here in front of me, so what can I say?"

"Is it not up to par, Tom? I'm sorry, I really didn't spend as much time with this one as I usually do, I just thought you'd rather have it for the issue that's due out next week, and you'd need a draft ASAP. I can revisit it—"

"You didn't spend much time on it at all? Maybe you should do that more often, McDonald."

"I'm sorry," she says, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No, no. I'm sorry for not being clear enough. This is the single most entertaining and poignant piece I have seen since I began my tenure at this magazine. It's brilliant, McDonald."

That's probably the last thing she expected her boss to say, "I-thank you, sir."

"I'd like you to go to the game today, though. I want a sound bite from him after his first game with us in the article."

She wants to scream. Instead, she swallows, "Of course, Tom. That's a great idea."

"Good, I'm glad you think so. It will really round out the piece. And McDonald?"

"Yes, Tom?"

"In case I wasn't clear enough before, this is a stellar piece of work here. You should under-think your articles more often."

Casey forces a chuckle, "Thanks, Tom. I'll keep that in mind."

"Have the draft on my desk Monday morning, kid."

"Of course," Casey agrees and the line goes dead.

…

Just before he's about to leave for the rink, Derek's phone goes off. It's Marti.

"Hey, kiddo. I thought you forgot about me."

“Never!” she swears, “So, Ed set us up with a live feed, since we don’t get the U.S. games up here. You know, so we’ll be watching,” Marti says, cheerily.

“Well, that’s good, I guess,” Derek responds, though his tone is less than sincere.

“Smerek, they do still care about you.”

He makes a non-committal noise of disagreement.

“Have you spoken to her yet?”

Derek laughs, Right, the entire world doesn’t know about what’s going on in his life. “I can do you one better. I’ve seen her.”

“You’ve seen her?” Marti blurts, surprise evident in her voice.

“Twice,” he confirms.

“Well?” she asks, “Look at you, taking charge for a change.”

“It’s not like that,” he says, shutting the door to his hotel room behind him.

“Smerek,” she whines, almost elongating it into two syllables, “Tell me.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

“I didn’t call her. She called me.”

“What? She knew you were coming?”

“She’s, well. She’s working for this magazine called *Sports Section*. She has this new assignment, see?” When Marti doesn’t catch on, he continues, “She has to interview players all the time, and this week it’s the new guy in town, a hockey player from Canada…”

“You’re shitting me.”

Derek sighs still trying to hail a cab, “I wish, but no. The universe really is that cruel.”

“So? Did you two catch up?”

“Not exactly,” he hedges. “Hang on a sec,” he opens the door to the taxi cab he’s finally managed to flag down, he scoots into the back and gives the driver directions.

“I don’t need to know the nitty-gritty, big bro, just as long as the two of you are talking again.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say talking, really.”

“Ewuh, Smerek. I said I didn’t need to know!”

“Oh, god!” he furiously tries to get his lips to catch up to his brain, “No, no. That’s not what I meant! We fought, and it was bad, really really bad.”

“Just give it time,” he can hear the smile in her voice, “I’m sure you can charm her into coming round.”

“I don’t know, Smarti. It wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Listen, Derek. As far as I’m concerned, you could totally snap, beat up a referee tonight, get kicked off the team, ruin your career, lose everything and I would still love you.” She clears her throat, “But if you screw up this second chance with Casey? Let’s just say I wouldn’t want to be you.”

“You’re a little over invested in my relationship with her, don’t you think?”

“If I don’t push you two to make up, I’ll be seventy-five before the two of you are friends again.”

…

He notices her among the press the second his skates hit the ice. And it’s weird, only it’s not, because she is pretty high up in the stands, but they’ve always been connected beyond time and space. Their eyes meet, and he sticks out his tongue. Casey rolls her eyes and rubs at her nose with her middle finger, casually flipping him the bird. His answering look is a mixture of playful outrage and amusement. She smiles, and almost giggles. For a second, it feels exactly like being in University again. Then Casey returns her gaze to her notebook, only daring to peek up when she feels like he won’t be looking.

He completes the practice routine with grace she isn’t used to seeing on him. Most of his shots go in, but it isn’t much of an indication of his game-play as the net is still unmanned. She busies herself writing, mostly a slew of metaphors she knows she will never use comparing his play to various and sundry things, all with rather derogatory connotations. If anything, she can be glad this assignment has taken her past that frustrating bought of writer’s block set in motion by one Madison Grace, white affluent Connecticut rest her soul.

…

There’s a lot of chatter on the ice that the fans cannot hear. The players, however, are plenty aware of it. And it’s making them restless, because it’s ten minutes into the third period and no one has gotten anywhere near the goal. Alongside Derek, Wes is bouncing his foot up and down like there’s an ant in his skate, and Vicktor, with his arms slung over the boards, watches the game intently.

Their rivalry with Boston is nothing like the Yankees and the Red Sox, but the insults are running hot. After a particularly tough run to the goal, their captain, Daniel Cifarelli, comes crashing into the bench cursing, “If those bastards don’t shut the fuck up, Myrvold is going to give someone a bloody fucking nose,” he says, referring, of course, to one of his defensemen, Chris Myrvold, known across the league for racking up the most penalty minutes.

The Boston Bruins’ left wing is making quick work towards the goal. Myrvold gets in front of him, trying to steal away the puck. The left wing, Schaal, speeds up and crashes Myrvold into the boards. Derek can hear snatches of the resulting conversation and none of it is pretty. They’re grappling on the boards while another Bruins player snatches the puck away.

Someone is shouting, and Myrvold and Schaal are suddenly ten feet away from one another, neither one paying attention to the game. Myrvold throws down his stick and seconds later his gloves and Schaal’s gloves are on the ground. The noise level in the arena is so high,

all sound almost ceases to exist. The referees, finally catching up with the program, sound the whistle and the brewing fight comes to a stop before it's even begun.

The Rangers are awarded a power play for Schaal boarding Myrvold, which means the Bruins will have to play the next two minutes one man down.

"Venturi, Volkov, Crawford," Coach barks, 'You're in. Don't let them kill the play before you get one in the net.' Wes and Vicktor file out first. Coach slaps Derek on the back on his way out, "Now's the time to show me what you're made of, kid."

They win the puck off the face off and the three of them are in the offensive zone in a heartbeat. All five of the opposing players are there too, doing their best to keep Derek's dream of a goal in his first New York game on hold. They pass the puck a lot, trying to keep it close, but once, then twice; it's almost stolen away from them.

Players are shouting, the goalie is taunting, and Vicktor makes his way behind the net. In seconds, he has control of the puck. Wes is distracting defensemen and Derek is wide open. He catches the pass, but the opposing team is quick. Wes, however, is quicker, and finds himself an opening. Derek sees that he has a clear scoring lane and passes the puck away from the defense. Wes traps it and flicks the puck, rather effortlessly, past the no-longer-so-smug goalie, who dives to his knees, when the puck slides cleanly, like butter, between his pads and into the back of the net.

The fans were loud during the fight. They've erupted now. The organ music is blaring, people are singing, and Wes is beaming as he takes a lap around the rink.

Quietly, back on the bench, Daniel leans over to Derek, "Nice assist, rookie. Keep it up."

…

As it turns out, that is the only goal anyone scores all game; the clock hits zero three minutes later without much of a fight from Boston. Even though Wes is the breadwinner, among the press conferences post game, Derek, cleaned up in slim-fit collared shirt and black v-necked sweater, is the media darling.

Casey stands near the middle of the crowd, where she hopes Derek won't notice her, but that line of thought is incredibly foolish, really.

When he does notice her, he smirks. And it's exactly like something wicked this way comes.

She tightens her lips, half-smiling back, and stares him down, "Bring it on," she says, knowing he probably can't hear her, but he'll know exactly what she's said.

…

What do you think Derek has up his sleeve?

Chapter 8

Thanks to everyone who keeps reading/reviewing. Especially reviewing!

…

She tightens her lips, half-smiling back, and stares him down, "Bring it on," she says, knowing he probably can't hear her, but he'll know exactly what she's said.

"Well, it looks like New York has a reason to be proud of its newest acquisition, Mr. Venturi," one of the reporters says.

"Please," he smiles, and its electric, "Call me Derek."

Casey gags.

"How was your first game in the world's most famous arena?"

"Well, I've been playing here for a week, but it's been empty. Like this, with the whole crowd here? You can't imagine the adrenaline rush you get when you step out on that ice. It's better than anything."

"Anything?" the same reporter presses.

"Well," Derek smirks, "Almost anything."

Another reporter raises his voice above the crowd's chuckles, "Have you been enjoying your time in our city?"

"New York has been very good to me so far," he rubs his palms alongside the edges of the podium, "and it's a lot of fun to get to know. The city feels endless."

"So you're not missing home yet?" a third reporter asks.

"Not quite. And after a game like that? Probably not for a while."

"To what do you owe your success on the ice tonight?"

Derek shakes his head; he's got the perfect self-deprecating smile down pat, "Well, of course, a lot of practice, a great team, and an even better offensive line. But," a soft blush spreads across his cheeks, and Casey is astonished. It's phenomenal; he'll leave no lengths untraveled in order to manipulate. "My st—a dear old friend—"

From the audience, Casey glares daggers at Derek. She isn't fooled by his slip up.

"She was in the audience tonight, and I shouldn't kid myself much longer, the girl's kind of my good luck charm."

Casey closes her eyes. *This is not happening.*

He addresses her in the crowd, "You wanna come up here and introduce yourself, Casey?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to steal your spotlight, Derbear."

His smile tightens. It's very subtle, but Casey knows him well enough and she has to resist the urge to pat herself on the back for beating him at his own game.

"Well," he turns his attention to the rest of the room, 'I know you all want to play with me 'cause I'm shiny and new, but my right wing in the real star of the game,' he gestures toward Wes, "C'mon up here."

Wes crosses his eyebrows, and meets him at the podium. He leans over to speak into his friend's ear, "Derek, what are you doing?"

Derek doesn't answer. He walks off the stand and out into the crowd, straight towards Casey. He slips an arm around her waist and walks her out of the public eye to the row of offices along the hall.

"What do you think you're doing?" she hisses, "The whole arena is gonna think you're taking me away for a quick fuck."

"As if your pet name didn't plant the idea in all of their heads," he snarks back. "Do you know what you've done?"

"What I've done?" She pushes him up against the wall, "You're a young, virile sports star in the biggest city in the world now! You can have a fling with whomever you choose."

He folds his arms across his chest, certainly not my keener step—"

"But me!" she talks over him, jabbing him in the chest, "People are going to have a hard time taking me seriously so long as I'm in the sport business!"

"You revved it up to sexual affair all on your own, McDonald. Don't you go pinning this on me."

"No, no! I was content to just go on ignoring you. You dragged me into this."

"I needed revenge for whatever it is your write about me in the article of yours," he looms over her, eyes dark.

"You think I would go so far as to ruin your career?" she lowers her voice, 'I know you, Derek. One prank leads to retaliation which leads to you always hanging around my life, and I don't want to see you again.' She looks away, like she can't bear the thought, "No, you would have loved the article I wrote about you. We'll see if it even gets published now."

She leaves the row of offices then, without another glance back. On her way out of the arena, Casey walks thought the press frenzy again, who all turn away from Wes and directly to her.

"How long have you known Derek, Miss?"

"For years," she responds, figuring any damage is already done, 'and I'm thrilled to we're back in the same city again.' Then Casey looks up and locks eyes with the nearest camera, "After all, I've really missed being with him." She walks off, wicked grin spreading across her cheeks. She'll be dammed if he's able to bed another girl after that, not when his long-lost good luck charm is back in the picture and all over the spotlight.

Casey pulls out her phone while she walks to the exit, “Payback’s a bitch,” she texts Derek. “An absolute bitch.”

…

Her fingers are quick, almost manic across the keyboard as she tries to make this process end as soon as possible. Casey intersperses the bits about Derek’s ice presence throughout the piece, crafting the transitions and adjusting syntax. It’s easy, like writing has not been since her move from Canada. An hour after she sits down, Casey places the finishing touches and gives what she hopes is the final read-through. Then, suddenly self conscious about it, Casey calls Kate.

“Hey, there. What’s up?”

“I just finished the profile on Derek. Can you proof it?”

“Sure, just e-mail it. I’ll do it now.”

“I already did.”

“Of course you did.”

Casey smiles, “Thanks, Kate. Just put your edits in red.”

“As always.”

Casey paces nervously around her couch in a dismal attempt to pass the time. When the phone rings a few minutes later, she pounces.

“Well, would you look at that, honey? You’ve found your muse,” Kate says, as soon as Casey answers.

“Stop it. You’re mocking me.”

“Case,” her voice softens, “I’m telling you the truth.”

“Seriously?” Case flops back onto the couch.

“Full disclosure?”

“Yes.”

“You know I love you?” Kate hesitates.

“Yes, yes. Now get to it.”

“Before this, I honestly didn’t know how you got the job. Your writing was technically proficient and all of that, but it was nothing special. This is a gem, Casey.”

“It has nothing to do with Derek.”

Kate laughs, “Did I say that?”

“It was implied.”

“All I am trying to do is give you a compliment.”

“A very heavy compliment rooted in your delusional thought that there is more than meets the eye with Derek and me.”

“Is there?”

“No!”

“Look, all I’m implying now is that you brought it up. You’re awfully defensive for someone who is completely over whatever happened between you and your brother.”

“Step brother!” Casey screeches.

“Same difference.”

“No. No it is not. We met when we were fifteen,” Casey explains, calmly, for what feels like the kabillionth time, ‘We never treated each other as siblings. We couldn’t; we were always too busy arguing, vying for dominance in a house with too many voices. And then when we went away from school,’ her voice drops, “Free from all that pressure to be a family, it seemed, for a little while at least, that we could be friends. But then it happened-we went too far and—” she catches herself. “We’re not siblings. And we’ll certainly never be friends again.”

There is silence of the line for a second. “That’s all?” Kate demands. “One of these days, I will bet that story out of you.”

“Can we just go back to talking about the article?”

Kate sighs, “Sure. I found a few minor mistakes, a couple typos. But other than that, it’s really, really good. You should write about hockey more often. You really know how to get a reader caught up in the game,” she says hockey, but they both know what—who—Kate is really talking about.

…

They’re at one of those restaurants: casual-televisions all tuned to the sports networks, one to the local news, volume low and subtitles on. In the middle, there’s a big bar inhabited by a few forty something’s shooting the breeze.

Wes called her after the game. “Wanna grab a bite?”

“Now?”

“Yeah…” he had the decency to sound embarrassed at his lack of planning, “if that’s okay?”

“As long as we go casual,” Kate agreed. “I’m dressed down and nowhere near home.”

“Sure. There’s this pub near the Garden. 36th and 7th.”

“Meet you there in fifteen minutes,” then she hung up.

Wes smiled. Finally, a no-nonsense woman.

On the tabletop, his hand covers hers and they smile as they chat about his game.

“And what happened on the ice wasn’t even the most exciting part.”

“I’m shocked.”

“You know we have this new player?”

“Yeah,” she rolls her eyes, “All too well.”

He looks at her, quirks his eyebrows.

“Down, boy. It’s big news at the magazine.”

“So you know,” he recovers, “after the game, of course there is this ridiculous press frenzy.”

“New meat,” she agrees, “Always is.”

“Right. He’s the new kid on the block, so they’re all over him.”

“Jealous?”

Wes glares, very playfully, “Oh you know. It was only my first goal in how many games?” he shakes his head. “I had my moment. That’s not what this is about.”

“Sure,” but she’s still smirking, “Go on.”

“Derek, that’s the new player, starts getting sentimental about this girl in the crowd-who I’ve definitely seen hanging around the arena before. He told me she was interviewing him, but I call bullshit. He never tells the truth about why she’s hanging around. But anyway—”

“Wes,” Kate stops him, voice earnest, “I know her.”

“What?” he takes his hand from hers, “No you don’t.”

Kate grabs it back, “Trust me. I know her.”

He looks at her, clearly skeptical.

“Long brown hair, blue eyes. Looks like she swallowed a lime whenever she’s around Derek…”

“You know her!” he exclaims.

“Yeah, she’s my best friend.”

“Who is she?”

“Casey. And she is profiling Derek for *Sports Section*, by the way.”

“Weird,” he contemplates, “they acted like they knew each other a lot longer than a few days.”

Kate is silent for a few seconds, pondering how much she can really tell Wes. “They knew each other in Canada,” she settles on vague, “It ended badly.”

He cocks his head.

“Yeah, she pretty much hates him now.”

Wes chuckles, “Well, that’s not what she said today.”

“Wes,” I would know. She hates him.”

“You didn’t see the two of them together this afternoon. They were making eyes at each other in front of everyone there. Then he all but carried her off to the lockers so they could have some alone time,” he smirks, wide.

Kate leans back, “Okay. We’re definitely talking about two different girls here. Casey hates him, I swear to you.”

“Hey,” Wes says, ‘The press was there, I bet they caught the whole thing on film. You know,’ he smiles, “It’s probably all over the internet by now. It was just scandalous enough,” Wes pulls his phone out of his pocket, “Wanna see if we can find it?”

A smile threatens across Kate’s face. Finally, she could get some answers about the two of them, “I really shouldn’t by spying on her like this.”

“Well, okay,” he says, heading to replace his phone. “If you’re sure.”

“Stop it right there, buster,” she grabs his hand, “I have to know about everything that goes on in the sports world. It’s not spying; it’s my job. If I didn’t watch it, I wouldn’t be a very good journalist, would I?”

He looks at her, joking disapproval written all over his face.

“Stop looking at me like that.” She schooches her chair closer, so they can both huddle around the tiny screen. “Let’s see what we can find.”

…

In his hotel room that evening, Derek finishes off a beer as he packs his suitcase with the television on. He has away games for the rest of the week, and the team will be on the road. Well, as much as flying first class and sleeping in four-star hotel rooms can be considered ‘on the road.’

After this week, they’ll be home for two weeks, long enough, he figures, to set up an apartment of his own. Until then, it was more nondescript rooms, plastic keys and ultra-smiley concierges. It was being away from Casey. He looks at the pile of clothes on the couch. It was being away from Casey, and her manipulative ways. He moves the pile from the couch to his bag. It was being away from Casey, and it would be good for him.

…

On the screen, Casey looks up and says the words that make Kate forget how to speak. If only she was there to witness it. She’d almost be proud.

Wes nudges her once it’s over. “Told ya. She’s in love with him.”

“Oh,” she snaps out of her daze, “I can’t believe she didn’t tell me. She’s been whining about him for weeks! And here I thought it was because he made her do all the chores at home or—”

“Wait, what?”

“He’s her stepbrother,” Kate slams her hand over her mouth.

Wes blinks.

“Shit. Shit! I doubt I was supposed to tell you about that.”

“For how long?” Wes presses.

“She moved in when she was fifteen. They’re a regular Marsha and Greg.”

He grins, “Ad we all know what happened in the movie,” Wes smirks, “This is too good to be true.”

Kate is still shaking her head, speaking around the fingers she has clamped around her lips, “I really can’t believe she didn’t tell me! That has got to be why she left Canada,” she drops her hand, “And now that she’s done with this article, she’s really never going to see him.”

“Kate, they share a family, I’m sure this isn’t the end of them.”

“She’s too damn stubborn,” Kate insists, “Unless she has to, she’ll make sure she never sees him again!”

Wes laughs, “You wanna get them together again, don’t you?”

“I’m her friend. I have to do what’s best for her.”

He smiles, “I have a plan.”

“Wes,” there’s a devious look in her eyes, “This is perfect. You’re perfect.”

“You know, you’re lucky I like you.”

“Oh?” she shoots back, “Why’s that?”

“Cause otherwise I’d find you absolutely insane in this moment—”

“Hey—”

“—instead of absolutely adorable.”

Her heart stills for a few seconds, she looks into his eyes, “Yeah?”

Wes smiles back at Kate, “Yeah,” he confirms, with laughter in his voice “Adorable.”

“Well you’re pretty darn lucky I like you back,” she says, and presses her lips into his for a kiss.

…

Wes has a plan; oh this will be so much fun, won’t it? Let me know in a lovely review!

Chapter 9

Ah, lovely readers! I'm so sorry it's been so long. There were college finals, then I had to move out of the dorm. And then I got home and left all of my motivation at school. but I'm back now!

…

Wes does not actually have a plan.

But he does manage to distract Kate long enough that she stops pestering him about it. That is until he's walking her to the nearest subway stop after dinner—and she's back on the war path.

"Patience, grasshopper," he grins. "All in good time."

Kate rolls her eyes, which for her, really involves rolling her whole head.

"Good things come who those who wait."

She glares from under her eyelashes, "You could do this all night." It's not a question.

"I could."

"In that case," she gestures to the upcoming entrance to the Subway, "I'm gonna head home. Give us a call when you're willing to share." Kate drops his hand and starts to walk away.

He reaches out before she's moved from arm's length and gently pulls her back, "Where do you think you're going?"

"I told you: home."

"Not without a proper goodbye, you're not."

Kate grins, wraps her arms around his waist and looks up at him. They're being completely obnoxious, entwined in the middle of the sidewalk, looking at each other with starry eyes.

They kiss, separated for a moment from the city and the hustle that surrounds them. He pulls back and whispers his goodbye.

"I'll call you later this week," Kate promises, "Good luck with your games, hmm?" and with a final kiss, she disappears into the station.

…

Casey pinches the bridge of her nose. She sits across the table from Madison Grace. The poor thing fell off her horse—she's a triple threat, just like all of Connecticut's finest—and dislocated her shoulder. The long term prognosis is rather good, but with the finals in three weeks, her tennis career is looking a bit rocky. And of course, the whole sorry affair is national news. She was the darling of the match and now—everything is unsure.

Casey finds herself drifting off, unable to grasp phrases longer that three words. Not to mention even, the fact that her speech is peppered with more likes than her Facebook newsfeed. Casey is certain it wasn't this impossible to pay attention before. Madison describes her plan for recovery. "If it means, like, sitting out of the, like, final, that that's what I'm going to have to do. Like, I have to heal. There's always, like, next year, right?"

"You sure you didn't hit your head when you fell off that horse?" Casey mutters.

"Sorry, like, what did you say?"

…

He used to think that his pre-game nerves were a bonus—it meant he was ready for what was to come. But after ten minutes in the neglected and filthy away-team locker room, Derek would give anything to make it stop. He just wants to catch his breath in any place that doesn't stink like urinal cakes and wet dog.

"Venturi," Vicktor slams his open palm into Derek's stall door, sending it flying open with a bang. He's unfazed, and Derek still has his head buried in the toilet. "Wipe the snot off your chin and get out here."

Derek retches again and mumbles something unintelligible.

Vicktor slaps him jovially on the back, "C'mon. We're due on the ice in five."

Derek swallows, stomach empty and hoping it is the end of the dry heaves. He pushes himself away from the toilet and makes his way to the sink.

Vicktor knits his eyebrows, "Are you okay?"

By way of answering, Derek shoves his whole head under the running faucet, gulping down water like he would rather be drowning.

He stands back, shakes his hair and draws the back of his hand across his mouth. Then he spits in the sink.

"Must have eaten something last night," he fibs. "But it's gone now, he meets Vicktor's eyes," I'll be fine. Let's go."

…

"Roommate hogging the bathroom again?" Casey quips as Kate walks in though her front door.

Kate rolls her eyes, "Nah. She's been rather in-control the last couple of days."

"To what do I owe the pleasure, then?" Casey throws her purse off the couch to make room for her visitor.

"Oh, nothing." She plops down next to Casey, "it's been a while. I figured it was time for us to catch up."

"You met someone."

"Casey," Kate whines, "How is it you always manage to figure it out before I tell you?"

“It’s the same exact speech every time. You come in here, acting like we haven’t seen each other in weeks, when it’s really only been two days. I work with you, Kate, I don’t go more than forty-eight hours without seeing you.”

“Why are you wasting your time working as a lowly journalist again?”

Casey smiles,

Kate glares.

“So, what’s his name?”

“Wes. Wes Crawford.”

“And his story? How’d you two meet?”

“He was at Minnie’s, the night I went off Casey’s mad at Derek suicide watch. We bonded over how much basketball sucks.”

“Finally your incredible hatred for the game gets you somewhere.”

“Just needed to find a man after my own heart, I suppose.”

“So,” Casey says, and turns to face Kate, sitting pretzel-style on the couch, “is that all I get? Tell me about him.”

…

Playing tonight is nothing like it was on Sunday. Derek is having trouble keeping control of the puck. The guys on the other team skate like the ice is falling away beneath them—smooth, almost like they’re flying. His stick feels like spaghetti in his gloves. Derek traps and passes the puck off to Wes, who finds an open scoring lane into the offensive zone. He hesitates and Derek skakes down the ice to meet him for a pass off. Vicktor hovers around the fringes, trying to keep the defense away. One of the burlier opposing players slips away and heads directly for Wes and the puck. He flicks it to Derek, who lines up the shot while the defense closes in. He slaps down his stick, gets checked from behind and misses the goal by a long shot. Their goalie doesn’t even bother reaching up to block the puck.

Derek gets slammed into the boards. In the stands, the fans cheer. The commentator chuckles, far above it all, “Looks like Venturi’s good luck charm skipped the game tonight.”

…

Kate rubs the back of her neck. “You’re not going to believe me.”

Casey cocks her head to the side, “What do you mean?”

“He,” she hesitates, “He plays hockey for the—”

“Shut up.”

“—Rangers.”

“*No he does not.*”

Kate smiles, “He does.”

“My god, Kate,” Casey buries her face in her hands. She peeks up at her friend through her fingers, “Really?”

Kate nods, “Are you mad?”

“Am I—” Casey sputters, ‘Am I mad?’ and then she laughs, “No, I’m not mad. I just—” she returns to laughing, face in her hands. “This is too much.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda bizarre, that’s for sure.”

“This means I’m going to be seeing a lot more of the team, aren’t I?” she says, not-so-coyly avoiding use of his name.

“No, of course not!” Kate cries, a little too quick to avoid suspicion.”

Casey looks up, totally oblivious. “And he hates basketball just as much as you do?”

“Oh, yeah,” Kate confirms, “Absolutely.”

“So that means I have no chance in trying to convince you to break up with him, huh?” Casey smiles, but she’s a least halfway serious.

“Casey!”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” Casey recovers, and musters up the biggest hug she can and crushes Kate inside of it. “I’m happy for you, I really am,” she gushes, but there’s something about her smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

…

The team pulls their shit together, even though Derek cannot; the second line whips them back into shape, tying the game late in the second period. A pair of bad calls against the Rangers led to two bullshit penalties, but the defense is stellar, still energized by the score.

Their euphoria is infectious—and Coach is feeling rather generous when he puts Derek and the rest of the third line back out in the middle of the last period. But immediately, it’s almost like they’re short a player, battling another Dallas Stars’ power play. The Texan offensive closes in, determined not to take this into overtime. It’s all the Rangers can do to keep the puck out of their zone. They’re on the ice two minutes and then three. Wes is slowing, and Vicktor looks like he’s about two seconds from knocking someone’s teeth out. They haven’t crossed to the offensive side once since they’ve been on the ice. Derek is getting restless and a little exhausted, but there’s no opening in sight.

Every time one of them gets control of the puck, Dallas steals it back. Four minutes. Derek’s lungs are starting to burn.

Desperate for an opening, Wes launches himself at the puck, knees to the ice and snaps his stick clean in two. He manages to knock it three feet to Derek, who flings it across the ice. Dallas chases after it and Derek, Wes and Vicktor scramble back to the bench for a full line change.

“Boys,” Coach growls when they get back, “You are an offensive line. It’s high time you start playing like one.”

..

After Kate leaves, Casey stands at her kitchen counter, staring at the wall.. Her television is on, tuned to some show she's seen before. She fists her fingers in a dish towel lying on the counter. Twenty six years old and single in the greatest city on Earth. Pretty and pretty likeable by most guys' standards and this is how she spends her free time, jealous of and pining after a relationship she doesn't even want? Casey closes her eyes, sighing. There has got to be another way.

…

Thank you for continuing to read, and please, please, please review!

Chapter 10

Gosh, have I mentioned how busy a month it's been? First I moved out of the dorms, then back home, and now into the apartment I will be sharing with a very dear friend for the next (possibly) three school years. And I was decorating, and working my summer job and oh! I've adopted a kitten-so very, very adorable, but needy and he's been keeping my up and about, night and day now that he's learned to jump (an activity he's very enamored with).

Phew! But I've finally gotten back to writing. So without further ado…

…

They lose it in overtime; no one is really surprised. And neither are they surprised when Derek and his line do not see another second of ice time. Post game, he sits in a bar with Wes and Vicktor, trying to forget about the whole ordeal in a glass of Jack.

Wes sits in the outside corner of their group, and by the time the other two boys are one, maybe two drinks in, his is still untouched. Instead, he's staring at his cell phone, still and unblinking.

Derek leans over, taunting "Waiting on a special call?"

"Hmm?" Startled, Wes looks up, "Oh, no. Not really," he catches himself and tucks the phone back in his pocket.

"C'mon. Our bartender's hot, that chick over there is hot, and the girl on the other side of the room is even hotter," Derek stares, half a second too long. "Your eyes haven't left that phone since we got here. Fess up."

"I don't see you picking anyone up," Wes fires back, knowing full well why Derek's not interested, or so he likes to think.

"It's not late enough. And I'm not interested in their conversation, that's for sure," Derek says and then sighs, "So who is she?"

Well, it wouldn't be right if Derek was that easy to crack, Wes supposes. "Her name is Kate." He smiles, and it's almost as if it's the first time he's come alive all night, 'I met her back home. We've gone out a couple times. She's…lovely,' he furrows his brow, "She also said she'd call."

Derek looks at him sideways, "You're a man; why don't you just pick up the phone and call her yourself?"

"Exactly: you're the man," Vicktor cuts in, "Why don't you forget about her and have some fun tonight?"

"You're probably right," Wes admits, "I guess something else probably came up."

"If you're so concerned about seeing her," Derek offers, "why don't you send her tickets to the next game?"

Wes looks at Derek.

“She’s from New York, right? Philly’s only a couple of hours by train.”

“You think she’d like that?”

“Yeah, if you sent her two,” Vicktor grins, “Maybe she’ll bring a date.”

Shaking his head, Wes motions for the bartender and orders a second beer.

Derek shoves Vicktor, “She’ll bring a girlfriend—hopefully a hot one,” his face lights up, “I’ll take ya out. We’ll double.”

Wes snorts, spraying his drink across the bar top.

“Dude, what the fuck?” Vicktor slurs.

“Yeah, man. What gives?”

Coughing, Wes tries to choke out a few words, “That’s-Derek, you’re-it’s brilliant.”

“It’s not rocket science,” Derek makes a face. ‘Though if we do dinner, there’s gonna be a lot of talking,’ he stares Wes down, “She better be *really* hot.”

…

There is a letter sitting on Kate’s desk when she arrives in the office that morning. It’s flat, corporate looking and generally unimpressive, but she opens it anyway. Into her hand falls a note scribbled on a bar napkin and a pair of tickets to a Philadelphia Flyers hockey game the coming Friday night. She pinches her lips together, a tad confused. Kate takes a second look at the tickets, and notices who it is the Flyers are playing on Friday night. Then she smiles.

Kate unfolds the napkin. “Miss you,” it reads in cramped handwriting, “Bring Casey?”

She pulls out her phone, and shoots a text message to Wes: “You know I’m going to have a hell of a time trying to convince her to come with me.”

His response if quick: “Oh, I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” and she can feel his smile, even if he doesn’t type it.

…

The first time it happens, she’s walking into the conference room for a mid morning meeting. A co-worker she doesn’t really know looks at her and nods, “Hey, lucky charm. Make ’em proud in there.”

“I—okay. Thanks, I suppose?” she calls out, but the co-worker has already disappeared around a corner.

Once inside the conference room, she sets up shop in her usual spot, gathering her notes into a neat pile.

“Casey,” the woman across from her greets.

Casey looks up from her notes, “Oh, Melissa. Hi, how’re you?” and they make small talk for a few minutes before they are joined by another member of the team.

He’s barely in the door before Casey is out of her seat, gushing. “Ricky!” she rushes at him, arms thrown open for a hug.

“Casey, honey,” he smiles, pulling back from the embrace to plant two kisses, one of each of her cheeks, “Darling, how ever have you been?”

“Oh, you know—”

“Right, right. The crush of the daily fuckin’ grind.”

“What brings you up out of the gossip den?”

He grins, “Oh, dovie, wouldn’t you like to know?” he seats himself at the table, “You’re just going to have to wait for the party to start before you can play, lucky charm.”

Casey stops, “What—”

Ricky turns his attention to Melissa, “Hello, lovely. What’s your name?”

In that moment, several more people walk into the conference room. Casey recognizes a few; the rest, like Ricky, are probably from other publications within the building.

The group splits, all grabbing different seats, chatting with one another as they do so. Casey collects herself, stops blinking in the corner like an idiot and joins them at the table.

“Oh, good,” her editor, sitting at the lead of the table glances at Casey, “Now that our good luck charm has joined us, we can begin.”

…

Kate notices some commotion in the break room. According to the clock tucked into her taskbar, it is far too early for a lunch crowd to be gathering in the break room, so she wanders over, curious. It is, after all, what makes her such a compelling journalist.

The group, mostly men—story of her professional life, really—is gathered around someone’s laptop. And Kate cannot hear much, through all the sniggering, but the snatches of what she does catch, she thinks she recognizes. Stepping lightly so her heels don’t clack on the linoleum, Kate moves closer.

…

Casey closes her eyes. She swallows. They’ve seen it.

The editor is grinning, “People—women mostly—are in love with Derek, McDonald. I saw your profile; well done.”

Her eyebrows meet over her nose, “Thank you, Michael,” she says, very slowly, “but judging by my new office nickname, I’m guessing that’s not all you’ve seen.”

“You two have a very interesting relationship.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention that I knew Derek before the interview. I didn’t think it was all that important,” she notices the men smiling around her, ‘Obviously, I was mistaken,’ she meets her editor’s eyes, “I apologize.”

“Apologize?” he opens his hands wide, “McDonald, the whole thing is perfect.”

Casey pinches her lips together, eyes narrowing, “Could you fill me in here?”

“All we need is one gossip columnist to connect Casey the reporter for *Sports Section* and Casey the good luck charm—”

Casey glares at Ricky; he shrugs looking like: there ain’t nothing we can do, honey.

“—And we’ll have a ratings storm like you would not believe.”

Fingers on the bridge of her nose, Casey takes a deep breath, “Wait. What, exactly, are you saying?”

“Oh, come on, McDonald. Two star-crossed lo—”

“Please!” Casey throws her arms out like she’s stopping traffic and she has to restrain herself to keep from launching across the table, “Please do not finish that sentence,” Casey is trying desperately to keep calm, this being everything she did not want to happen and all.

“McDonald, seriously, we couldn’t write something better if we tried.”

“You don’t understand,” she’s shaking her head almost violently. “That’s not—we’re not. Our relationship is nothing like that.”

“Yeah, not yet,” one of the peons speaks up from the crowd.

She wants to slam them, but Casey places her palms, ever so gently onto the tabletop, “Mr. Morgan. Sir, I really would prefer to discuss this situation privately.

“There is nothing to discuss; Ricky is going to spin the article and the people will lap this up like Angelina’s adopted *another* child.”

“Let me get this straight: you want to set up Derek and I as, how do you put it, ‘star-crossed lovers’?” she lets that one float in the air for a second.

She looks around the conference room. Most people are smiling; the editor nods, “Yes.”

Casey cracks a smile. “You do not want to do that.”

…

Mid afternoon on his day off, Derek’s cell phone rings.

“You dirty little dog,” Marti accuses before he can even say hello.

He smiles, and she can hear it in his voice over the phone, “What?”

“Stop pretending, big brother,” she taunts, “I saw the video.”

Derek sighs, “Honestly, Marti, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You met up with Casey, and you got a little biblical, didn’t you?”

“Marti!” he hisses his little sister’s name. “Please.”

“Please?” she laughs, “Oh, please yourself, Derek. The littlest in the family always grows up the fastest. I spent so, so many years as your little sister. And you’re surprised that I’m so well-informed?”

He closes his eyes; this argument is best left alone, “It wasn’t like that, Smarts.”

“Sure, sure. That’s what you’ll tell all your little siblings, huh?”

“Did you see the article?”

She plays innocent, “What article?” or maybe not.

“Casey was interviewing me for *Sports Section.”*
“Oho, so this has happened more than once—*Smerek*, you stud.”

“It didn’t go well—we fought—”

“If that isn’t a euphemism, especially for the two of you, I don’t know what is.”

Derek sighs, more heavily than he thought he was capable of. “Honestly, Martina.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“We fought,” he insists, “She stormed out, so when she showed up at the game, really, I was just trying to have a little fun with her, like old times, maybe embarrass her a little, only…” he racks his fingers through his hair, “Well, you saw the video. It looks like more than it was.”

Marti giggles, “At this point, Derek, it’s really only a matter of time.”

“What makes you such an expert?” he challenges.

“Please, Smerek,” and she’s practically laughed off her pants by now, “Please.”

…

“Look, McDonald,” Michael Morgan stares at her from across the table, “it’ll be good for you too—”

“I’m really not concerned about me right now, more so about your credibility as a publication, if I can be perfectly honest. Derek and I are not lovers.”

“It doesn’t matter if you are or if you aren’t. All we have to do is make it look like you are,” he pulls out the sleaziest smile, “You two will do the rest.”

Casey takes a deep breath. Clearly, there will be no convincing him that this is a bad idea. The only leverage she has left, she is not willing to give up. Besides, seeing them blow up in their own bullshit would be so much sweeter than the look on his face now.

“I tried to tell you,” she puts out her hands, they can’t fire her; he needs her, “But hey, it’ll be your shit storm.”

…

With more care than she really has because of how fiercely her hands are shaking, Casey shuts the conference room door behind her.

“Case,” Kate hisses when she spots her friend, ‘Come here. Listen,’ she says, as soon as Casey sits down in her cube, “there were a bunch of guys watching that video clip of you and Derek in the break room half an hour ago.”

Casey lets out a strangled laugh. “That’s not even the worst of my problems.”

Kate glances at Casey, eyebrows raised, “What could be worse?”

“Michael Morgan—”

“—son of a bitch.”

Casey glares, “Michael Morgan, has decided to publish our story—”

“—your story?”

“Casey the good luck charm a.k.a. Casey the reporter as Derek Venturi’s long lost lover…” she trails off. “For the sake of ratings. There’s no convincing him otherwise.”

“Does he know Derek is your step brother?”

“Oh, no.” she folds her arms across her chest, “and I wasn’t going to be the one to enlighten him. That’ll be my only saving grace—how stupid he’ll look when it comes out that we’re related.”

Kate bites her lip, looking sideways at Casey, “But you’re not really related. It’s legal for the two of you to, like, get married or something, right?”

“I know that, you know that. All everyone else is going to see is the *brother* part,” she paces, rather erratically, as erratically as one can pace when in a cubicle only six foot square, “Those four letters won’t make a difference to anyone.”

Kate rolls her eyes, judging by Wes’ reaction, Casey’s assumption is probably inaccurate. “Who’s writing this? Why would anyone who reads *Sports Section* even care about the two of you?”

“He pulled up Ricky from the gossip rag downstairs.”

“Ricky? I thought you two were friends.”

“Apparently not—that conniving little bitch.”

“Well, ask him not to.”

Casey pauses in her pacing, “No, that won’t work.”

“Casey.”

She looks deliberately down at Kate, “If he refuses to write it, Morgan will just push someone else onto the task.”

Kate sighs, “I’m sorry.”

Casey lets out a wordless exasperation, tearing her fingers through her hair, “I need to get out of here.”

If she weren’t so distracted, Casey would have seen the way Kate’s face lit up. “You know,” she starts, “If you’re serious,” but then she trails off.

Whipping her head around, Casey stares at Kate, “Go on.”

“Fancy a visit to Philly?” she grins, “We’ll take Friday off and make a weekend of it.”

“What’s the occasion?”

Kate hedges, “Wes, uh—he gave me, well—”

“Kate.”

“How would you like to see the Flyers play the Rangers on Friday night?” she smiles, impossibly huge, hoping it’ll distract Casey from what she’s saying.

“Absolutely not.”

A head bobs along the top of Kate’s cubicle wall then, “Hey, lucky charm,” one of their co-workers winks at Casey as he walks by.

Casey glares, “But if one more person around here calls me that…” she threatens.

“Come on, Casey. You have to stop letting him dictate what you do with your life,” Kate pleads, ‘You need to get out of town for a little while—he’s just going to be a tiny dot on the ice,’ she laughs, “Well, likely a very big dot… these tickets Wes sent are really good—”

“You’re not helping yourself out there,” Casey says.

“Really, Case. He’ll be on the ice, sure. But you don’t have to talk to him,” she throws her arms open, “Hell, do what you’ve always wanted: pretend like you don’t know him.”

Casey is shaking her head, eyes closed when Kate hears it again over the wall of her cube, “Lucky charm, it’s you!”

Casey fists her right hand into her hair.

Kate looks up expectantly, “That was one more person,” she grins, “So? What do you say?”

…

Will Casey say yes? Is Philadelphia big enough for the two of them?

Chapter 11

Whew. I am sorry. I will get better at updating, I promise. But if for some reason I don't, I can promise that I'll never abandon this story. So that's kinda good news right? :D

Anyway, if I remember this correctly, this is a long one, so at least your wait was worth it!

…

"No."

"Casey," Kate stretches her name into several syllables. When that doesn't get a response, she folds her arms across her chest and mutters petulantly like a child, "You're such a party poop."

Casey flinches, that particular insult has always needled her the wrong way, but she is not backing down on this one. No sir. "I just don't see the point."

"The point is that your best friend has invited you out for the weekend. You should do this for me."

So Casey sighs, hating to disappoint her friend. She looks at Kate, "I just can't; I'm sorry." Casey starts to walk away then: there is only so much of Kate's disappointed face she can take before she needs to save a an abandoned puppy.

Halfway between Kate's desk and her own, a co-worker shoots Casey the upward nod. He puts his fist up, and its reflex for her to return the bump after so much time in this boy's club she calls her job. It would have been okay, but then he opens his mouth: "Good to see you, lucky charm."

He keeps walking, Casey stops dead. She makes a strangled noise somewhere between a sigh and a scream, air whistling out of her like a teapot. "Kate!" she barks, looking vaguely in the direction of her friend, "Let's go."

Kate chuckles, unmoving.

"Now!" Casey shrieks. In seconds, they're in the elevator, then the lobby. And in minutes they're out on 7th Avenue. She looks uptown and then down, and Casey can almost make out the black and gold of Madison Square Garden.

"Screw the men, screw this job, screw it all," she says and it's the closest Casey has ever gotten to cursing in the years that Kate has known her. "We're going shopping."

Kate grins, and before she can stop herself, it's out of her mouth, "Planning on getting pretty for Derek?" she freezes and looks guiltily at her friend, who whips her head around so fast it's a wonder she doesn't snap her neck in two.

"What?" Casey demands. She lowers her voice to a hiss, but Kate has no trouble hearing her over the midday traffic. "You said I wouldn't have to see him."

Kate struggles to swallow a gulp, “No. Of course you don’t. It’s just that we’re sitting so close-he might see you. The whole point is to, uh, prove you’re fine-you don’t-need-Which store do you wanna hit?”

Casey looks at her with narrowed eyes.

“C’mon, Case. Do you even have any cute winter clothes? I’m thinking about some kind of ski-lodge chic… for when we’re on the ice, you know?”

Casey blinks, ski-lodge chic? That’s not what she wore in college. That’s not what real fans wear. “Oh god,” Casey groans, “You’re one of those girls?”

Kate looks at her innocently, entirely confused.

“You’re going to a hockey game, not an ice-skating birthday party,” she says as if will suddenly make sense. She looks at Kate sideways, “No, you need a jersey.”

…

It doesn’t mean anything that Casey knows the closest place to buy New York Rangers apparel is less than ten blocks up and over on 6th. She just likes looking at maps in her spare time, okay? At least, that’s what she wants to tell Kate the entire way there, while she’s looking over at Casey like she knows something Casey does not.

“Here,” she steers her friend in front of a rack of Crawford jerseys. “You’ll want one of these.”

Kate gets all wide-eyed and blushes, “Gosh, this is for real, isn’t it? I’m dating a hockey player.”

Casey rolls her eyes, gently, “Get a youth one. It’ll fit you better,” then she wanders off a few feet. As far as she can tell, the jerseys are in no particular order, but that doesn’t stop her from looking. Casey takes three steps away from Kate, who has busied herself trying on several different sizes in front of one of the store’s mirrors, and there it is. It seems that the New York Rangers do not waste time. She moves closer, drawn by some kind of personal vendetta, and there’s this annoyingly huge swell in her chest that feels suspiciously like pride. Before she knows what is happening, she’s pulled the closest shirt off the hanger and buried her face in it. It feels like a jersey, just the same as they did in college, only this time it’s so much more: it’s not two kids with dreams anymore. It’s one who has realized his greatest wish, and one who has, well, not. It smells like him.

Kate calls her name and Casey drops the offending garment like it’s on fire, springing away from the rack and to Kate’s side in the space of two heartbeats.

They look at each other in the mirror. For her part, Kate pretends like she didn’t see, but she does in fact know exactly what Casey was doing on the other side of the store. She smiles.

“This one?” Kate holds up the navy home uniform, “Or the white one?”

Casey rolls her eyes, “Honestly, Kate. You report for *Sports Section*. Their fans are called the Blueshirts,” Casey snaps, “Get the blue one.”

Kate grins, she might as well be batting her eyelashes at Casey for how sweet she looks, “And what about you? Are you getting one?”

Casey shifts, “Uh, sure. Just as soon as I find a nameless one-don’t look at me like that.”

But Kate can’t keep the smile off of her face as she drags her friend back to the rack of jerseys Casey just about knocked over a minute earlier, “The name of the game is pissing off Derek, isn’t it?” Kate grins wider, nodding her head up and down, with her hands on Casey’s solders, and she keeps flicking her eyes to the rack.

“No,” Casey shakes her head, but her resolve is weak, ‘no,’ she tries again, but she struggles to keep the threatening smile from breaking out across her face, “I couldn’t.”

“Yes, yes you can.” Kate swallows, desperate to keep her words from tripping over one another on the way out of her mouth, ‘C’mon, honey. Imagine the look on his face when you show up in this.’ She touches the red letters that spell his name, almost stroking them, “You could only do better if you showed up naked.” Kate freezes, afraid she has pushed Casey too far. But she looks at her friend: Casey’s eyes are glazed over.

“No,” she mumbles and reaches out, tracing his number on the shoulder, ‘Not naked. In this,’ Casey pauses, transfixed in her tracing, “and nothing else.”

The resulting peal of laughter from Kate is infectious: Casey breaks her trance and dissolves, laughing, in absolute hysterics. In between gasps for air, Casey chokes out, “Alright, I’m n-not do-doing that.”

Kate’s eyes drop.

“But I will wear this to the game,” Casey concedes.

As they stand in line to pay, Casey turns to Kate gleefully, “Now I remember why I’m friends with you: you’re brilliant. Derek is going to be furious when he sees this.”

Casey steps up to the register. Unseen behind her, Kate whips out her phone to text Wes; she hears Casey snap at the guy working the register, “Sure, I might be the first one you’ve seen buying his jersey, but I certainly won’t be the last. Derek will knock your socks off,” she bites, “And you won’t be able to keep these on the shelf. Just you wait.”

…

Wes’ cellphone trills in his pocket.

“That your lovebird finally getting back to you?” Derek laughs.

“Dunno,” Wes replies, focusing on the phone as he swipes it open.

She’s coming, the text message reads, *And wait until you see what I got her to wear to the game.*

Wes is grinning like a schoolboy, and Derek isn’t stupid. “So I take it your bunny is coming tomorrow night?”

He returns to packing up his gear before responding, “Yeah,” he shrugs, but his smile gives away how excited he actually is.

“And her friend?”

“Her too,” Wes grunts. “Of course-I’d never leave you hanging.”

“Sweet,” Derek leans against the lockers, his duffel already set to go. “Have you met her?”

“Once,” Wes says, and he looks over at his friend. ‘Kate’s taste in female friends is just as good as her taste in guys,’ he smiles. “Trust me. Tomorrow’s gonna be one hell of a night.”

…

They stand in the side by side in the Amtrak terminal early on Friday morning. Kate looks over at her friend, “Come on, you promised. This will be fun.”

Casey stares up at the arrivals board. Leave it to Penn Station to mess everything up.

“At most you’ll have to say hello,” Kate keeps with their unspoken agreement not to say his name, “It’s not as if you’re marching to your death.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” Casey says with a small smile, still looking at the board, “which of those would be easier.”

“You are such a drama queen.”

She sighs, and looks down at Kate. “I know.”

“So? Quit thinking about it and smile for fuck’s sake.”

“Seeing Derek again is like facing every one of my biggest mistakes, Kate.”

“Well, it’s you and me against the world, baby.”

Casey snorts.

“Well, against our fears at least. I’ll be right by your side. Besides, I wanna see the look on his face when he finds out it’s you in that jersey, and not some adoring fan.”

“Who says I’m gonna let him get that close to me?”

Kate rolls her eyes, “We already decided. This weekend is about facing our fears.”

“What do you have to be afraid of?” Casey narrows her eyes.

“Please, Casey, I’ve never even been to a hockey game. Before you know it, Wes is going to discover me for the fraud I am and,” she huffs, pushing away pretend tears with the heels of her hands, “And it’ll all be over,” she says, voice quaking.

Casey pushes her. “Shut up, Kate.”

…

He has to be honest; he didn’t expect that the first time he’d see someone wearing his Rangers jersey to be inside the Wells Fargo Center. But that’s exactly the sight that greets him when he walks out of the locker room some time before the game Friday afternoon. Facing away from him is his number and his last name hugging a decidedly sexy female body. And he knows, even if she’s an airhead, that this is so much better than the most knowledgeable of male fans, even if the guy was at everyone of the games, supporting the team… no, give him

a girl over a guy any day of the week. A fan like her, with an ass like that, he could get lost in. Wes elbows him, “Should we go say hello?”

Derek clears his throat, “Why would you come with-Oh,” he says, when he realizes there are in fact, two girls standing there and the second has *Crawford* emblazoned across her shoulders.

“C’mon, dude. You act like this is the first time you’ve ever seen a chick in your jersey.”

Derek closes his eyes, suddenly immersed in the memory of that first time when he lent his practice jersey out-to an almost unbearably feisty brunette in University. Back then, he had been taken aback by his surprisingly visceral reaction to seeing his name branded across her shoulders. If he was being honest with himself, and actually acknowledging his feelings-which he most certainly was not-he would have said that was the first time that he felt like his name belonged on the girl wearing it, like he’d never tire of seeing it there.

Wes says something again. Possibly. Then he lands a punch on Derek’s arm, “I said c’mon. Let’s go say hi.” Derek shakes his head, clearing away the bittersweet memory, “Huh?”

“Let’s, go, say, hello,” he enunciates every word.

Derek’s face is blank.

Wes tries to catch his eye, “D, you wanna meet Kate, right?”

“Wait, that’s-that’s Kate over there?”

“Yeah, dude. How else do you think they got down here?”

Derek smirks, practically high five-ing himself, “So the one wearing my jersey…” oh, tonight was going to be so easy if she was already wearing his name.

“Yeah, yeah,” Wes dismisses, “It’s very cute.” He walks up behind Kate, slipping his arms around her waist. Then Wes tucks his head alongside her ear, bending slightly to fit.

“Have I mentioned how much I missed you?” Derek hears Wes croon. A few feet short of where Kate’s friend is standing, Derek stops, and dials up the charm.

“Well, would you look at that, sweetheart? We match—”

His name disappears as she whips around to face him, all fire in her eyes with her lips parted in disbelief.

…

Casey blinks. “Kate,” she says, and it’s supposed to be threatening, but it comes out soft, questioning. She draws her eyes down to Derek’s feet and then back up, to make sure, she supposes, that it is really him. When she returns her gaze to his, he’s smirking, like he’s caught her doing something she shouldn’t be. Casey twists her face into an expression of distaste. She realizes Derek is speaking.

“…didn’t think we were apart for so long that you’d forget my name, Princess.”

If only.

Casey looks away, “Kate,” she tries again, infinitesimally louder this time.

“How many times do I have to tell you? It’s Derek.”

Derek. Casey swallows. She closes her eyes. *He’s not supposed to be here.*

Somewhere nearby, a different person clears her throat.

“…like you to meet my boyfriend, Wes.”

Casey opens her eyes. There is a blond person standing in front of her grinning. “Hi, I’m Wes,” he says, and sticks out his hand. When Casey doesn’t respond, he looks sideways at Kate. He steps back.

“God, SpaceCase, introduce yourself.” Derek shakes his head, “They told me she was trained, but apparently there’s a screw loose in this one, eh?”

No one laughs.

“Right,” he says, and he gets down on Casey’s level, and she feels as if she’s being spoken to like a small child, “It’s time for the boys to go play hockey now. Maybe we’ll see you after the game?”

Then Derek leans in. She doesn’t flinch like she expects to. His lips are almost touching her ear, sending flutters across her neck, “Cute shirt, Spacey.” His voice is light, teasing. It pisses her off. Something snaps into place.

…

Wes turns to go, disappointed and dragging Derek with him, and Casey finally opens her mouth: “Well then, Venturi, break a leg.”

Wes stops. Kate catches his eye, and they smile at one another.

“Get your theatre talk out of my ice rink, McDonald,” Derek fires back without turning around.

“Oh, I’m not wishing you luck,” she snarks, “I mean it, DerBear, break a leg.” Casey is grinning, ear to ear. Kate and Wes wait, frozen to the same spot, silent.

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you?” Derek’s voice is taunting. “Gonna come over and nurse me back to health?” Wes watches as a smile spreads across Derek’s face.

Casey doesn’t respond, and so Derek turns around and walks towards her, dropping decibels off his voice like they’re going out of style, “Though I can’t decide if I’d rather you were in a tiny little nurse’s uniform,” he sweeps his gaze down her body, only dimly aware of how wrong this should feel, but he cannot stop himself now; he stops in front of her, just out of arm’s reach, “or my jersey.” Derek swallows, unsure of when his thoughts regarding his stepsister got so filthy; because now there is this image in his head of Casey walking around his hotel room, wearing his number and *nothing* else. He drags his eyes off her hips, entirely aware of the havoc this is wreaking on his body. He chews on the side of his tongue, as he slowly looks back up.

Casey is glaring at him, arms folded under her chest. Derek swallows, hoping to all that is holy that she’ll reposition her arms. He watches her breathe, the fabric tight and the vee of his jersey cut dangerously low. She has her head cocked to the side and a smile playing at the

corners of her mouth. When their eyes meet, Casey gets this look in her eyes like, *Oh*. And he can't decide if it's just about the greatest thing he has ever seen or the worst.

"Seriously, Spacey," he smirks, trying to regain some semblance of control, but his voice is heavy and he can feel the blood thrumming through his veins, "It's a good look for you." He means it to be sarcastic, but the traitorous statement that comes out of his mouth without any warning whatsoever sounds raw, demanding, almost sincere.

Casey stares back at Derek, her pupils dilated, chest bursting. Her heartbeat is everywhere, pounding in her ears, her fingertips, rushing down her spine like a thick lick of white flame, "I can take it off."

Derek swallows, his throat dry. It's out of his mouth before he knows what's happening, "Please do."

Kate reaches across the two feet that separates her from Wes and grabs his arm. Casey fingers the hem of her shirt, eyes locked tight with Derek. Kate flexes her hand, her grip on Wes' arm tighter than a virgin.

Derek moves toward Casey. He can't breathe.

On the other side of the line neither of them will cross, Casey takes a step closer. Her throat is tight.

The door to the locker room behind them bursts open. Air rushes into Derek's lungs, and he and Casey jump apart, breathing heavily.

"Venturi, Crawford," Coach barks, and they snap to attention in front of him. "If you boys are done flirting, there's a hockey game about to start."

…

Back on the ice or into a quiet corner of the locker room? What's it gonna be for those two?

If you're still with me, please leave a review.

Chapter 12

Have I mentioned I have a young kitten? And a new apartment to decorate? And vacation plans to agonize over? (excuses excuses, for real, I promise I'll update faster next time)

Thank you all so much for your continued support and interest in Trade. *It's really humbling to see how many of you are reading. Thank you, thank you. If it weren't for you, I'd never have the stamina to finish.*

…

Derek hits the ice just after the captain, annoyed. His pregame dalliance with…her meant there was no time to get rid of his pregame nerves, praying to a porcelain god he didn't much like the smell of. Subsequently, Derek's stomach is twisted in one big knot. He skates in a lazy loop around the rink, absent mindedly flicking hockey pucks toward the goal. Disinterested, he looks away from the net and into the stands. In the sea of orange behind the bench, they are the only two fans dressed in blue. But that isn't why he notices her.

Casey is holding up a spiral notebook with something scrawled across it in red. He skates closer.

BREAK A LEG, #11

He flips her the bird-an impressive feat in hockey gloves, but he's had that move down since high school-and skates on. This time, Derek watches his shot as it skims down the ice like butter-cream, connecting smoothly with the back of the net. He thinks he hears someone cheering in the stands, but he doesn't turn around to look. He shoots again with more confidence this time, weaving in and out of his practicing teammates, an easy smile on his face.

…

Derek sits next to Wes on the bench, avoiding all eye contact. Vicktor watches the on-ice action with his arms slung over the boards, leaning forward in his seat.

It's the middle of the second, the game is tied one to one and Chris Myrvold, notorious angry defenseman, just cross-checked another players on the Philadelphia Flyers, which means he'll be stuck in the penalty box for the next two minutes of gameplay. Two minutes, or until the Flyers score a goal, effectively ending the power play.

"Boys," Coach looks to Derek and the rest of his line, "Go kill the play."

Derek groans, and he's lucky coach cannot hear him over the din in the arena. Generally, penalty killing is grunt work, extra defense in a thankless and grueling two minutes busting ass off the bench.

Wes and Vicktor file toward the door. Derek rolls his eyes and hops the boards.

"Venturi," Coach stops him, and Derek glances back, "Don't let them get anywhere near the net."

Derek nods, and snaps his helmet into place. The captain, Daniel, catches his eye, “Go get ’em, rookie.”

…

“This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?” Casey looks at Kate before the game begins.

Kate smiles softly, looking guilty, “Are you mad?”

Casey looks away, “I definitely wouldn’t have come if I’d known. But I can’t say that this wasn’t good for us-for me.” she looks back at Kate. “We’ll see how the rest of the night goes, hmm?”

Kate chuckles, “Fair enough.”

“Because I know that you’ve for more planned for me and Derek then just this hockey game, don’t you?”

…

Derek plays like Wes isn’t there, which makes for awkward hockey when the team is playing shorthanded. He makes all of his passes through Vicktor, putting him in a position he’s not comfortable playing. So its seconds, really before Wes is wide open, but Vicktor is not, and Derek passes it to him anyway. Someone from Philly steals the puck, and Vicktor rounds on Derek, furious. The Flyer shoots for the goal, and the Ranger’s goalie lunges for the save just in time. Derek catches the rebound, and refuses to pass the puck along. Vicktor lifts up his stick, shouting, screaming angry. Wes reaches out to stop him, because he can see it happening before it does, but he’s too late. And it’s a good thing Derek has the puck covered, because Vicktor slams his stick down into the ice and it snaps, clean in two.

Vicktor looks up at Wes and growls, “Go make up with your boyfriend, and get the puck out of the fucking zone.” He throws himself in front of the net, acting as a second goalie, because without a stick, it’s pretty much all he can do to stay in the game.

Philadelphia steals the puck away from Derek. He scrambles, and in the resulting scuffle, he quickly regains control, flinging the puck across the ice and out of the Ranger’s defensive zone.

On the ice, everyone goes batshit chasing after it, and Vicktor trips over his boots, skating fast enough to get to the bench in order to replace his stick before he’s needed back in the zone. Wes, fast as he is blond, wins the chase to the puck, but he’s surrounded before he can break away.

He looks to Derek, who’s wide open, and Wes doesn’t hesitate. He passes it across the ice and Derek is off, pushing himself toward the end of the offensive zone. There is nothing between him and the net but the goaltender. He’s left the others behind, slicing up the ice at his heels.

The crowd is thundering angry and making no secret of it-certainly not what he expected it to sound like on his first killer breakaway. But this is a game of surprises.

He stares at the goalie and steels himself, clenching his jaw. Derek raises his stick in the air, and lines up the shot. The dogs are screaming close behind him. The audience roars in one collective growl. Derek’s stick comes down and connects with the puck. The arena is silent,

as if every last fan is holding his breath. The puck floats over the goalie's left shoulder and lands solidly in the net.

The sound that erupts is not the victory song he's come to expect. It's annoyed, but for a few seconds, he thinks he can hear someone screaming his name. Then his team crashes into him, sticks in the air and absolutely ecstatic.

…

"And it's back in the game for the Rangers," comes the booming voice of the commentator, seated far above the crowd. "That's a power play goal from rookie to the team Derek Venturi, making him one of only two Rangers to score short-handed this season."

"We haven't seen much from Venturi," the color commentator chimes in, "aside from a cute little display with his so-called good luck charm after his first game."

"During which, while he had a smooth assist to fellow linesman Wes Crawford, was a little less exciting than some had hoped for."

The other one agrees, "And then there was that completely lackluster performance he made against Texas earlier this week."

"But not this time. Venturi's good luck charm, Casey, has got to be back in the audience tonight."

…

In the locker room after the second period, Derek and Wes sit next to each other. Coach has finished his pep talk and the team has the last few minutes of intermission to themselves.

Derek glances at his friend, "You knew, didn't you?"

Wes stares back, his face blank.

He sighs, "You knew about me and Casey…" he presses.

Wes looks back and he folds under Derek's gaze. "Yeah, Casey told Kate about the two of you and—well, look-I, uh, Kate-and you know, she—"

Derek holds up his hand, "Thanks," he stands up, clasps his friend on the shoulder and walks away.

…

The team watches, Derek in utter disbelief, while his hard work is undone in the first two minutes of the final period. The Flyers make quick work of the Ranger's normally stellar goaltender, skating on the very edge of legal game play. They score almost immediately after the faceoff, and the fans, as hockey lovers are known to be, are beyond obnoxious in their boisterous cheering. They begin an anti-Rangers chant seemingly spontaneously, that lives on for minutes into the next play.

Much to his annoyance, Coach doesn't yet trust Derek enough to put him back on the ice, unparalleled performance tonight aside. And perhaps because of that decision, or simply because Philadelphia is on the top of their game tonight, The Rangers don't come back from that, and lose the game two to three.

…

He figured something out back on the ice. And if he was going to actually acknowledge it-but he will not, it's just not his style-he'd know that was what put him in such a foul mood. Derek sits across from Casey, watching her bat her eyelashes at their last minute post game drinks guest.

"He's just cross because his first goal with us wasn't enough to win the game," Vicktor says, shoving Derek in the shoulder.

Casey smiles, "Oh, that's Derek for you. He always gets what he wants. It's been like that ever since I met him."

Derek rolls his eyes, and tries to concentrate on his drink.

"Probably long before that too," Vicktor agrees.

"Look," Derek grunts, "If the rest of the team played half as well as I did tonight—"

Casey cuts him off, "But I don't want to talk about Derek, Vicky." She points her eyes at Derek as she is saying this, her voice saccharine, her hand closing over Vicktor's on top of the table.

Derek grinds his teeth, trying to figure out how could he possibly think that his earlier revelation could be true when she's so goddamn irritating. He sighs; Vicktor is already completely, ridiculously starry eyed looking back at Casey. And lovebirds Wes and Kate at the other end of the table have their heads bent in so close to one another it would only make sense if they were kissing; they've flown completely over the nest. And just like that, Derek becomes the unwelcome fifth wheel at his own celebration party.

He wraps his fingers around his glass and listens to the ice clink against the edges. He downs the entire thing in a single gulp, slams the glass down, and leaves for the bar.

No one notices.

…

Kate grabs Wes' arm, "Look what the fuck you did."

"Me!" Wes looks up, startled.

Her voice is laced with irritation, "You invited him."

"I didn't think he'd—"

"Exactly! You didn't think."

"Kate." Wes looks at her and she looks back; Kate knows how ridiculous she's being, but she refuses to admit it.

Wes clears his throat, "I had to! It's his almost-victory-post-game drink privilege too!"

Kate stares, "So that's it? We're giving up?"

"No, of course not. I'll—"

"You'll fix it."

…

Derek would tell her that she was running scared. She wouldn't believe it, but he would be right.

She doesn't remember anything about their conversation outside the locker room but how difficult it was to speak. And that terrifies her, because Casey has never forgotten her words in front of Derek. They use words like people with normal relationships blink. Constant, endless and involuntary. But they stood across from one another in the bowels of the Wells Fargo Center, her body wound up so tight she would have found softness in a straight jacket- her throat closing up and her mind completely blank.

And there he was, staring back at her with exactly the same fear written all over his face- like they were playing some kind of game only it went too far—

Casey closes her eyes for the briefest of breaths and tries to concentrate on what Vicktor is saying.

But she can't.

Because Derek is at the bar. He's over there and if Casey isn't chatting up Vicktor to provoke Derek back into their bickering status quo, then why is she bothering to have this conversation at all?

…

The place is thick with the haze of people. And even though the en-hotel restaurant and attached bar the group picked is far classier than the Hooters Derek was pushing for, it's still a challenge to hold a conversation out on the dance floor. This is precisely why, when the vapid redhead sitting next to him at the bar turned around to introduce herself, he immediately pulled her out onto the floor.

"So, Derek, what do you do?" she asks, very coy when the music switches from pulsating to quiet blues.

He looks down at her, the answer already rolling off his tongue, "I play hockey for the New York Rangers."

And her face changes instantly from disinterested to rapt. It's the same look every girl gives him after that declaration, the look that he's come to know as almost concrete proof that he's getting laid tonight. But something about that knowledge makes him feel used, dirty. Almost like he shouldn't be looking for someone so easy to impress. Like for the first time since college, he realizes that he deserves something more than a casual fuck with the closest girl in a skirt.

…

So, are we going to start treating Vicktor as public enemy number 1 now? And what's that, is Derek acknowledging his f-fe-feelings?

Thanks for reading; please do review!

Chapter 13

It so has not been a month or anything since I last updated. Seriously, I love you guys for waiting. School starts back up again on Monday, so I'll be back in the swing of avoiding my school work in favor of doing something I really want to do. :) Without further ado…

…

Wes' grand plan is to get everyone onto the dance floor together.

Kate thinks it is a stupid plan: "Are you crazy? That's not going to solve anything. If Casey decides she wants to come-which she will-she'll just take Vicktor with her."

Wes rolls his eyes. He drops the hand he has outstretched to Kate, "Don't you trust me?"

"Not as far as I can throw you," she quips and stands up. Casey turns around at the sound of chairs scraping back from their table, "Where are you going?"

"Dancing," Kate takes Wes' hands and starts leading him to the floor.

"Oh, Vicky," Casey turns back to the hockey player, "Let's go with them."

Kate stops. Vicktor looks like he's about to be sick. "Yes! You two should come," Kate implores, "Come on, Vicktor. It'll be fun."

Vicktor sighs, "Okay, if you insist."

Wes leans over to whisper to Kate, "Did I mention Vicktor can't dance?"

"Perfect."

It becomes evident to Casey almost immediately that Vicktor has two left feet. He shuffles before her, trying desperately to not look the fool. "You're good at this, aren't you?" Vicktor leans in close to speak above the pound of the music.

"I've been dancing since preschool," Casey blushes, shouting back, "I sure hope so."

She twirls around in front of him, trying to entice Vicktor into getting a little br more experimental with his dancing.

It's hopeless. So she scales back her skill to match his. Then she pretends, and not very well, that se is paying attention to Vicktor and not scanning the dance floor for a better option.

…

After two songs and one very long period of silent dancing, Kate pulls Wes closer to Casey and Vicktor.
"I'm parched," she yells to Casey, touching her forearm, 'Aren't you thirsty?'
Casey tilts her head, slowly releasing her grip on Vicktor, "I guess so."
Kate brightens, "Great! Let's go get a drink," she says, and pulls Casey off to the bar before anyone can protest.
They slide up alongside a couple more interested in one another than their immediate

surroundings. Kate spins around to face Casey, effectively ignoring the approaching bartender, “What the hell are you doing?”
Casey looks at her sharply, “What do you mean?”
‘You know exactly what I am talking about.’
“You’re always wanting me to loosen up, meet someone. Vicktor’s cute; what the hell is *your* problem?” Casey counters.
“Casey, everyone within a five hundred mile radius can see there’s something between you and Derek. You’re not going to be happy if you keep running away from it.”
Casey folds her arms across her chest, “Go dance with Wes, Kate.”
‘You have to take your life into your own hands, Case. Stop waiting around for everything to come to you.’
“Why don’t you go focus on your own relationship for a five minutes and let me take care of myself for a change?” Casey snaps, her expression hard.
Kate turns around, shaking her head. With one last glance at her friend, she walks away.

…

Casey contemplates the bar top then, fuming. Kate doesn’t know anything about what she went through with Derek. Which is mostly because she never told Kate anything, Casey realizes, but that is not what’s not important right now.
Casey looks past the restaurant tables, past Vicktor, and past where Kate and Wes stand, embracing one another more than actually dancing.
She spots Derek on the opposite end of the floor with his hands wrapped around the waist of a girl with shoulder-length red hair and a wardrobe more suited to a trailer park wedding than a classed up hotel bar in the center of Philadelphia.
Casey starts away from the bar, teetering on the heels she changed into before dinner, and starting to regret that decision. Coupled with a very strong cranberry vodka, stilettos complicate her coordination, coordination that’s questionable at best when she’s sober. Casey pushes forward into the gyrating crowd of dancers, and it is exactly like the one and only mosh pit concert she attended in college before she decided that scene was not for her. She can feel every pulse in her body as she draws closer to Derek, trying to keep from being noticed until she’s upon him.
As she gets nearer to the center of the throng of people, her heels start sticking to the layer of spilled drinks and dripping sweat on the floor. The crowd is thick, and maneuvering between groups and couples is becoming increasingly difficult. It’s oppressive, being locked inside this mass of sweating bodies. Then the crowd parts, circling up around a particularly energetic dancer, spinning himself around on the floor like the wet mop it desperately needs.
The dancer puts his hands on the floor and throws his feet in the air. Casey makes a face; she would never place her bare hands on this floor. It’s a veritable petri dish of disease. She finds herself in the center of the opening; the floor is even slicker here and she has trouble keeping her footing as she inches along the edges, attempting to blend in with the spectators while still moving closer to where she last saw Derek. She takes her eyes off the spectacle to look for him.
The dancer lunges. Casey sidesteps out of the way. Her foot lands on something that is decidedly not floor, and she slips. She throws her arms out, trying to keep from landing face down in all of the disgusting bar filth and debris. She knows, and so does every self-absorbed person around her, that it is futile and she is going down and there is nothing she can do to stop it. Inches from the floor, a pair of arms catch her under her armpits, hold around her chest and lift her, miraculously, from the floor.

“Th-thank you,” she manages. The arms hold her close to their chest so she can right her feet underneath her. “God, that would have been so—”
‘Embarrassing?’ he asks, “Yeah, Klutzilla, If it weren’t for me you’d be down there catching herpes off the floor.”
She turns around, still locked in his embrace.
Their eyes meet, and the air is tight. They don’t even have to shout over the music in order to be heard.

Derek clears his throat, “It’s a wonder you made it through all those years alive without me around to catch you when you fall.” As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he wishes he could take them back.

She looks up at him. There is something painfully honest about her gaze.

He swallows. *Fuck.* She’s been under his skin since she turned around outside the locker room. Everything about her screams to him tonight, and try as he might, Derek just cannot stop answering the call.

“Maybe,” Casey take s a breath, absently aware that one of them should have pulled away from the other by now. ‘Maybe you should let a girl,’ she wets her lower lip, “Let a girl take care of herself, then.”
He has no idea what they’re talking about anymore. Derek is still watching the spot where her tongue wet her lip. He adjusts his grip around her, and that is it.
Her face hardens and her words come tumbling out of her mouth like they always have around him, “Because I am perfectly capable of handling myself.” She wrenches herself from his grip, giving him a look that would flash freeze all the sweat on the dance floor. She stands, furious, just inches from his grip.
He reaches out to straighten a piece of flyaway hair that came loose in her tussle, “Right,” he says, his fingers lingering for too long on her cheek, “that much is obvious.”
She is torn between a gasp of indignation and a snarl when they are interrupted by his date.
“Sorry that took so long, Derek,” the redhead slides her arm around his hips, elongates her vowels with a cheerleader’s whine, “The line in there was *endless*.”
Casey rolls her eyes; the girl is obviously an idiot.
She looks at Casey, who is not even trying to hide the look of distaste on her face. “I’m sorry,” she says, though it doesn’t sound even the slightest bit sincere, ‘Am I interrupting something?’
“Of course not,” Casey snaps. “Derek,” she emphasizes, as if she’s just learned his name, “was just pointing me in the direction of the restrooms. Don’t worry,” Casey flicks her eyes to the girl, “I was just leaving.”

…

Samantha looks up at Derek, “Well, that was weird,” she says and knits her fingers with his.
Absent mindedly, he watches Casey leave, “Yeah, weird,” he agrees as Samantha leads him deeper into the dancers.
They don’t speak. They don’t even share meaningful looks in lieu of conversation. She moves against him and it’s not complicated, it’s nice.
Samantha is pretty, and likeable, and even though she was acting a little possessive and maybe even jealous before, she’s got no drama.

He could move his hands down from the semi-respectable place on her lower back to cup her ass. The music changes; the beat is just as quick and she folds seamlessly from one song into the next. Simple. He could lean in close, touch his lips to her neck and whisper an invitation in her ear. He could pull her flush against himself and convince her to say yes.
Derek spins her lazily, watching the break dancers in their spot on the floor. It would be so easy; they could be up in his hotel room before the end of the song. When he looks at Samantha, she's looking away into nothing, almost as if she's watching television. But then she turns, and he catches her eye. She smiles, and it's not happy, but it says everything he needs to know.
He moves his hands around her hips, holding her tighter so that his fingertips meet just above her ass.
"Oh my god; I'm so sorry!" a voice screeches in his ear and then there is an explosion of pain in his left foot.
He wants to scream back at the voice, something horrible and filthy. But he breathes, tight through his nose to keep from calling out in pain. "I'm such a klutz!" the woman says in a big fake voice that sounds eerily familiar. He whirls around to face her.
Casey smiles at him, her arms on Vicktor's shoulders, "Is your foot okay?"
He sets his jaw, nostrils flaring.
Casey's smile grows infinitesimally wider.
Derek tightens his hold on Samantha and he nods, "I'll be-I'm," he cannot concentrate on his words over the pain blooming out of his foot, 'Fine. I'll be fine.'
"Really, Derek?" Samantha pipes in. "We can go sit down if you need to." Her voice drops and she leans in so only he can hear, "I'll make you feel *all* better."
"I'm *fine*," Derek repeats, louder and perhaps a tad too harsh considering she's just trying to be nice.

Casey moves on with a last apology and a promise to be more mindful of where she steps from then on. "I just had no idea how pointy this stiletto was," she giggles, and then she and Vicktor are gone.
"Isn't that the chick who asked you about the bathroom before?"

Derek sighs. He really has to stop picking up such observant women. All of this conversation is starting to ware on him.

"Was it? I, uh, didn't notice," he lies and then tries, unsuccessfully, to change the subject to something that involves a lot less speaking.

"I'm pretty sure," Samantha says and after a moment of silence she adds, 'That's really weird.' She cocks her head, "Why won't she leave you alone?"

Rolling his eyes, Derek replies, "It was just a coincidence, alright?" Don't worry about it."

She steps back, "I don't know what you have to get so defensive," Samantha complains. he tries not to roll his eyes. Instead, Derek starts tuning her out, answering in complacencies, nodding along, and not paying the slightest attention to a single word that comes out of her mouth.

Across the floor, Derek sees Casey dancing with Vicktor, her arms closed around his back, head tucked in above his shoulder, looking back, directly at him.

She doesn't falter or look away and when he catches her staring, so neither does he.

He knows exactly why he does it: they need a catalyst and if he leaves it up to her, they would be pussy footing around until she published a novel's worth of pro/con lists. He needs some goddamn spontaneity.

The music is loud. The people between them don't matter. Casey's eyes are still locked with his, looking across the floor, resting comfortably from their perch on Vicktor. His hands are full of Samantha. Derek watches Casey as he draws his hand into the red hair at his fingertips. With his other hand, he pulls her hips to his. Casey picks up her head, her gaze suddenly attentive. Derek slides his hand farther into her hair and the other lower on her ass. He tips her head back, smiles one last second at Casey, and Derek kisses Samantha.

…

Oh, come on. Samamtha's not so bad, right?

Please review!

Chapter 14

Oh, I'm not even going to pretend like I have an excuse for how late this is. So we pick up right where we left off:

…

Across the floor, Derek sees Casey dancing with Vicktor, her arms closed around his back, head tucked in above his shoulder, looking back, directly at him.

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He feels her at his side in heartbeats. Not that he's been counting. Casey is still wrapped around Vicktor, and her smile is alight with danger. She is warm, and he can feel Casey everywhere. So he closes his eyes, and kisses Samantha harder.

The music changes and the whole floor switches to a slower dance. Derek spins Samantha around so that he can be back to back with Casey. She leans into him, flush from her ass, so her head is almost resting on his shoulder, "Nice pick, does she come STDs included?"

"Didn't take you long to cozy up to my friend, did it?" With the beat, they move away from one another, and then she's alongside him, and there is no contact between them. He speaks again when Samantha looks away, "It's like high school all over again."

She presses her face into Vicktor's chest. He's tall enough so that his chin tucks onto the crown of her head, then she smiles at Derek. Then she looks Samantha up and down, "She's not blonde, but busty, stupid," she ticks off the list, "It really is high school."

The music comes to climax. It's hot on the dance floor, and all of his synapses are firing. His pulse runs out into his fingertips. The crowd surges with the chords, and in seconds Casey and Derek are pressed together again, back to back. He leans into her, his lips almost touching her skin, "And I thought you learned your lesson after Max. I thought it was no more insensitive jocks. Not the truth, eh?" he digs at Vicktor, his malicious whisper right in her ear.

"Why do you think I could never stomach dating you?" They're pushed closer together, touching from ass cheek to shoulder blades. Everywhere they touch, her skin is on fire. Casey drives her heel into her own foot to snap herself out of it. It hurts for half a second, and then

everything is warm again, and she can't breathe. She puts her hands behind her back, and touches his leg, "I know exactly what you're doing, Derek."

She tosses her hair.

She smells like vanilla. She's always smelled like vanilla.

He licks his lips. "Congratulations, I see they taught you something at that expensive private college of yours," Derek sneers. He feels Casey stiffen, throw back her shoulders. He steels himself to keep from losing his footing. Her head snaps up straight. They're no longer touching. "How's Daddy? Spoken to him recently?"

Casey closes her eyes, "He paid for school, but I cover my own way now," she jams her elbow back into his ribcage, "So fuck you, Derek."

"Is that an invitation?" Where his cheek touches hers, where his back holds her up, where his breath touches her skin; everywhere he touches, it burns. Casey's hands fall off Vicktor's shoulders. Derek slides his hand into her back pocket. She sighs, and falls into him instead of away. On the other side, Vicktor knits his hand in hers. 'Because,' Derek turns so his mouth is right alongside her ear and his voice shivers down her spine, "Because that could be arranged." His voice is velvet. And she cannot tell if she can actually hear him speaking or if this is all in her head.

Casey drops her hands from Vicktor, and closes her eyes. She moves with the music, eyes closed, and everytime she does, Casey can feel Derek against her.

She takes a breath, and they touch, barely. Casey catches Vicktor's eye, "I'm sorry," she says, and he has to read her lips over the sound of the beat.

Casey doesn't wait for Vicktor to catch on. She turns, and Derek matches her movement. Casey looks up; their eyes meet and immediately she closes them, and the distance between them. They touch from collarbones to hips, Derek's arms are wrapped around her back. His lips are by her ear and she can't speak for the feeling welling up in her throat.

"God, Derek."

His teeth are on her earlobe, and her hands are in his hair. Everything feels like— -it feels like everything is happening all at once and— -she pulls back, still holding him…

He swallows; she watches his lips. And his eyes flutter and flicker down and closed. His lips are parted, all of the breath has vanished from his chest. Casey can feel her heart beat inside of her throat. His forearms twitch and clench. He leans toward her. In her mind, she sees Samantha's face.

Casey balks, rips her hand from his grip and throws it in a beautiful arc that connects horrifyingly with the side of his face.

The adrenaline rushes straight to his dick. He spits, and the sound stops the music in his head.

"Don't you touch me with that slut-fucking mouth."

Derek's face is stinging and red and his dick is hard, pressed up against her. He knows she can feel him. His heart races.

And Casey stands there, staring. Fuming, her breasts rising and falling in time with her breath. The she swallows, her eyes bulge, and like a deer in headlights, she bolts.

He reaches out for her wrist, but she slips away. “Case— -Spacey,” he runs after her when she doesn’t answer, “Come on.”

She gets on the elevator and lets the doors close behind her. Derek rushes up the stairs, and it really feels like high school— -hoping he can catch up to her before she locks herself into her bedroom. The flights of stairs are doubled, and he’s out of breath by the time he reaches her floor.

She’s slumped against her doorway, and he doesn’t even take a second to check his attitude. Derek stalks down the hall, pressed forward by the ache in his cock, coming to a stop directly in front of her, hands on the door on either side of her face, he leans close, “What the fuck is your problem?”

Her heart stops in the breath she takes, and then so does his. Casey looks up at Derek, like she is realizing it just as he is. “You,” she says, and it rips her in half to admit it, to be suddenly so honest, and so raw.

It’s the best damned thing he’s ever heard her say.

Before she knows what’s happening, her mouth is on his and her soul is pouring forth faster than she can breathe. Casey is drowning, but thriving. He is hard in front of her, and the door is firm behind her. For the first time in five, maybe fifteen years, she can stand tall without the help of anyone, but only now that she has the support of the one who means everything can she really stand tall enough.

He grinds his hips into her slow, but absolutely frantic and she scrambles: her fingernails on the back of his neck, her fists in his hair. “You know, Der,” Casey presses her face alongside his, “after all this time you’ve had to practice, I had hoped you’d be a little better at this by now,” she teases, tantalizing in his ear. He growls, and wraps his hands around the back of her pants and cups her ass. Casey feels her feet leave the ground and he kisses her with such force that her shoulders smack into the door. He trails his lips, hot, heavy and soaking down the side of her neck and nips where the top of her shirt meets her breasts. He moves his fingers around front; teasing at her waistband, playing with the lace of her tiny panties. He bites her lip and rips a moan from her then, like it’s the last thing he’ll ever do.

He groans, his fingers in all of her pockets, “Where is your key?”

“Derek,” she laughs, and it’s beautiful, and kind of breathy. ‘You think you’re getting in that easy? Oh, no.’ Casey puts her hands on his face, cupping her palms along his jaw, “No, it’s not going to work that way.”

He looks back at her, eyes full, lips open. “What do you want me to do?” He asks, keenly aware of the shift in their power dynamic.

And then she asks for it, the one thing he’s always been afraid of doing; “Show me how much you want it.”

He pulls back and she slides, just half an inch lower on the door. Then Casey blinks, checks her groan before it’s out of her throat and puts her feet back on the floor. Derek looks at her, and then closes his eyes. He kisses her cheek and nuzzles her neck and she can’t help

the noises that come out of her mouth. His dick twitches. “Goodnight, Case,” he catches her gaze, “I wouldn’t want to start this again unless you’re absolutely sure,” he drops his hand from hers. Derek’s heart is pounding, his breath is shallow in his chest, and he’s biting the side of his tongue, trying desperately not to laugh. And hoping beyond hope that she’ll wise up and call him on his bullshit. With a final smirk, he turns around and begins to walk away.

“Where are you going?”

He doesn’t turn back, and he’s halfway down the hall already. She bolts after him, “Derek,” she screeches, “Der-ek!” Casey catches up to him, he face is pink and the color is spread across her whole chest.

She hears another door open on their floor, “Do you mind?” and she turns to find a disgruntled man in a bathrobe peeking his head out of the door, “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Casey flushes a deeper shade of magenta, and grabs Derek’s hand, “Sorry, sir. We’ll just- we’re going now.”

Derek pulls against her, walking back toward the bank of elevators. “No you don’t,” Casey yanks him toward her, “No, no. You’re coming with me.”

“Is everything all right there, kid?” the man asks as Casey drags Derek in front of his door. Casey stops, opens the door to her suite, staring between the two men. The man in the bathrobe is smiling, “Do you need me to call someone?”

Derek grins and then he winks, “I got it.”

Casey huffs, yanks Derek into her room, “Good night, sir.” She closes the door and spins Derek around so he is pinned up against the wall. She draws a deep breath, and stills, trying to focus her thoughts around the cloud of want, need.

“You think I’m not ready for this?” she has one hand on the center of his chest, splayed between his muscles. He feels so strong. She pauses, fumbling for her thoughts. Casey hits him when she remembers, ‘Have you seen my shirt?’ she hisses, “Do you see what I let Kate talk me into wearing?”

He bites his lip, the corners of his mouth quirk up into a smile. His heart pounds warningly fast.

Casey spins around, her back to him, “Look!” she peers at Derek over her shoulder, ‘Do you see what’s written on my back?’ She points, “That’s your name. Your name!” She looks away, into the suite, across the desk, and the television, and the bed. Oh, the fucking bed, with it’s pillows and covers and it’s wide horizontal surface… “God, Derek— -what else do I have to—”

She feels Derek run his fingers along the letters on her back.

Casey flinches, looses her footing, and falls into Derek. He catches her around the waist; his left cheek touches her right.

She rolls her eyes with her whole head, she can feel him smile, “These damn impossible shoes,” she bends over to take them off. His hands are still on her hips and her ass is right on his— -Casey knows Derek is pretty solid; he has to be after hours of suicides on the ice rink,

but *damn*. She forgot what he felt like. Casey whips around, shoes only half off. Her chest is pushed into his, and she has her hand pressed around his dick; he's rock fucking hard. Casey looks up at him, grinning slowly, her eyes narrowed, "You were never going anywhere."

He kisses her and she's not ready; the momentum pushes them up against the bathroom door. Her other shoe falls to the floor. Derek's hands are on either side of her face, pressed against the wood as hard as his hips are pressed to hers. He licks a line up her neck, and Casey moans, low in her throat.

Derek smirks, his eyes alight, "What was that you were saying about me not being good enough?"

She wraps her arms up around his shoulders, her breasts pressed up against him, "That's not what I said," her lips are by his ear and he sinks into her words.

"Oh," he breathes, "it's not?"

"No," only its more a moan than a word, Casey starts circling her hands around the blade of his shoulders. 'All I was saying is that with all this time to practice,' she shudders, and has to catch her breath, "I thought you've have picked up a few new tricks by now."

He growls, yanks her into his own space, and buries his face between her breasts.

"You're good enough, Der." She gasps when he runs his tongue along her collarbones. "I just thought you'd be mind-blowingly good."

He scoops her up and throws her down on the desk alongside the giant bed. Derek pulls her to him, his hands around her ass, his movements quick and decisive. The edge of the table is sharp against his thighs. But she's warm against his dick. He holds her hands on the desktop and looms over her.

"You're really bringing your A-Game, huh?" Casey grins at him, wraps her legs around his waist, yanking him closer. 'Is this what you whip out for all the ladies?' She has her hands up under his shirt, her fingertips tracing the outline of the muscles in his back, "I think you can do better." She's goading him, and she's doing a damn good job.

"I could leave," he draws the line of her ear with his tongue.

Casey moves her hands to his ass and pulls him close, trying to suppress a moan when their bodies touch. "This is our bit, D." She holds his gaze, "You have to beat me."

He pulls her off the desk, holding her to him. He kisses her neck, sucks at her pulse point, drags his tongue where his jersey meets her skin.

"You know," he says between kisses, "when you were standing with Kate, outside the lockers…"

She makes a noise of agreement, lips busy on the skin of his neck.

"You're the first person I've seen wearing my Rangers jersey…" he stops, he cannot breathe enough air fast enough to keep up with her, "God, to know the first fan who noticed me wasn't some giant sweaty guy…"

She dips her head into him, smiling. He can feel her mouth on his cheek.

“I thought she had the best damn ass I’d ever seen,” he squeezes hers, “Before I knew it was you, of course.”

Casey drops her legs and shoves him backwards, ignoring the whimper she wants to let out at the loss of contact. Derek grabs her around the waist and they topple onto the bed, her on top of him. Her heartbeat is everywhere. Her legs are open. Casey straddles him, one hand splayed on his chest. “It’s time this comes off,” she pulls back the collar of her jersey, “I think I’m allergic to your ego,” and Casey removes it in one swift motion and leans over Derek until their faces are almost touching, and her breasts graze him just below her chin.

“Much better,” he agrees, but throws her off and pins her beneath him, his eyes in her eyes and their souls finally on fire.

“So, Casey,” he dips his chin alongside her ear. He holds her wrists with one hand above her head, and his grip is tight. “Do all the same things turn you on?” With one hand, Derek flicks opens the button on her jeans, and yanks her pants off from her ankles. Then he’s back in her face and her breath is coming in short, her chest pulling in and out in time with the beat of his heart. She throws one of her dancer’s legs over the back of his thigh, begging him closer, but he refuses. Casey whimpers; he shifts his weight and he traces his fingers all over her torso. His touch is lace feather light over the swell of her breasts and the hollows in her hips. And he kisses her, everywhere, on her nose and lips, her collarbones, between her breasts, just above the bow in the middle of her bra.

She arches her back, making little noises, fingers wrapped around the strands of his hair.

And Derek continues down her stomach, his hands on her thighs, fingertips tucked underneath her panties. He licks his way down to the top of her pussy and he pulls her underwear down with his teeth, using his hands and the flat of his tongue to help them off the rest of the way.

Casey writhes, and uses his position change to flip on top of him, straddling him across his stomach, so wet she’s probably leaving a mark. “I like this shirt,” she says and breaks into a smile, “But I think it would look better on the floor.” Derek swallows through a huge smile. She pushes her hands up along his sides, halfway between sensual and tickling and presses into him closer as each inch of fabric comes off.

She moans when their naked skin touches, and they switch again, on their knees, facing one another on the bed, her hands quickly undoing his belt buckle. He pushes her back onto the bed, hands full of her breasts as he kicks off his jeans, and his pants fall carelessly to the floor. She doesn’t even have a second to admire him in his underwear before he puts his head down and follows his hands with his tongue. She knots her fists in his hair and he smiles near the top of her thigh. But Casey pulls him up by the back of his head, rolling her eyes, “Oh, come on. That never works.”

The room is bright enough he can still meet her eyes. He trails his hand from her ass to the back of her thigh and holds her leg up level with his shoulder, “That’s because you refuse to be vulnerable with anyone.” He kisses the back of her knee, and bites her leg.

Casey glares, “Pot, meet kettle,” and removes her legs from his grip.

“Right,” and he starts in on her other leg, ‘That was my mistake. Did I accuse you of not being vulnerable enough?’ he punctuates his words with wet kisses on her calf. His cock is

aching, and showing this much restraint will quite possibly kill him, but he snarks on, “More like the opposite, Princess.” He bites the soft skin of her inner thigh and she gasps, her legs tighten automatically around his head and his face is pressed flush to her, wet and sweet. Casey swallows, desperate to keep her voice steady as he tongues her inner thigh and the outside of her lips, “Please, Derek.” It’s meant to be blase, and she almost pulls it off, “I just know what it is that I want.”

He pauses for a second, and she has to bite back a a moan of regret when he stops. He peeks up at her from between her legs, his bangs falling down onto his forehead and his chin damp. Derek licks his lips, waiting for her to continue.

She fists his hair, propped up on her other elbow, “You’re trying to beat me. And let me tell you, that’s nothing compared to the real thing.” She presses her knee into his crotch. Derek doesn’t even flinch.

He shakes his head, his smile devilish. “Poor poor Casey and her sexually repressed boyfriends who don’t know how to eat a pussy,” He keeps his eyes locked with hers for a second longer and then tongues a hard line up the center of her clit.

She screams.

Derek gives her a kiss and then pauses, just long enough to mock her, “Should I stop?”

Casey cannot answer, her cries are wordless, and her hand at the back of his head tightens as he continues the barrage of his lips on hers. He continues until she’s mewling, hands spread and grasping at the sheets, her mind so out of focus she can’t even remember her own name. She wraps one of her legs around his neck and holds him close; he cannot breathe, Derek can only feel and it’s her, everywhere it’s her. He draws her close to the edge, she can’t make a sound, her breath comes in like a hurricane. He can’t feel his jaw, he digs his fingers into her side and then runs them up her legs. He kisses and then licks and then pulls back gives her a second to catch her breath, still running his fingers all around her.

She swallows, backs down from the ledge, her whole body still humming and he walks his fingers closer. She breathes again, “Derek,” she says, beautiful, broken, exhausted, and he pinches her clit and sinks his fingers inside of her while he drags his tongue all across her lower abdomen.

Casey’s sweet and convulsing, and he watches her eyes when he lifts up his body, just as she’s about to come. He pulls his fingers out and strokes her cheek.

She cannot even focus her gaze on his. He dips his hips into hers, his cock so hard it’s holding the slit is his boxer briefs wide open. He presses into her, the cotton soft, but entirely not what she wants.

Casey lurches forward, her hands full of his ass, her fingernails scraping along his skin, pulling down the black briefs just far enough so that she can pull them off with her feet. She centers her hand on his chest and pushes him down beside her on the bed. And then she swings one leg around, and lands directly on his dick. She circles her hips, and she slides onto him, tight and wet and gorgeous. He fills her completely, and it’s like coming home.

Derek groans and unclasps her bra. She falls forward, pushing the cups off her arms as she goes, until her nipples graze his chest. She moans. Her lips are tracing the outline of her ear,

and his are buried in the hollow between her neck and shoulders. They're entirely still, adjusting to the moment.

His voice cracks on her name, and they begin to move.

She takes the lead, sets the pace: slow and agonizing, but deliciously good.

Derek doesn't think he can manage coherent thought, but bickering with Casey is second nature. "You're trying to kill me aren't you?"

She looks down at him, her breasts bouncing with the movement of her hips, and he can't look at her face at a moment like that, "No Der, I believe this is what they call fucking." The smirk on her face is too good to be true, so he flips them so he's back on top.

He growls, once again incapable of sentences. She's got her leg slung up over his shoulder, and damn, the girl knows how to drive him wild. He thrusts into her, and he face falls to the side of the pillow. She's gasping, moaning, alternating between his name and a string of expletives he's never heard come out of her mouth before tonight. Casey only breaks her facade for him. He leans until their faces are closer, he kisses her forehead, her nose, and then both of her cheeks, and when he kisses her lips, he draws his fingers in circles around her clit, and it's enough to send white hot bolts of pleasure down her legs and up her spine and to her brain, and she comes undone around him. Her orgasm rolling in like waves, and her convulsions and her helpless mewling, and they way she says his name all enough to take him with her over the edge. He collapses into her, her legs falls to his waist, and she holds him there, one hand on his back and the other on his ass.

Derek's lips are by her ears, his breath is shallow and hot, "The puck's in your net, SpaceCase. I think I won that one."

Casey runs her fingers in his hair. "You don't win anything until you do what you promised," she nips at his earlobe and grins. "You win when you make me come with that slut-fucking mouth."

He presses himself up so he can look her in the eye. Her face is impassive, but he can see his own smirk reflected in her eyes, "Is that an invitation?"

…

Merry Christmas. ;) and please, please leave a review.

Chapter 15

So, I've actually published something during the middle of the semester. Can I get a hell yeah?

…

Casey looks up at him and she laughs, her eyes shining and her breath pittery and shallow.

"Derek," she says, lazily drawing her fingers in circles on his chest, "What are we doing?" she's back on top of him, straddling his stomach, and just shy of holding his gaze.

"Well, Case," he says, his tone mocking, "I believe this is what they call fucking."

Casey rolls her eyes, her whole head. She smiles, gently squeezing his forearms resting on her thighs, "Could you not make fun of me for forty-five seconds?"

Derek's smile is as soft as hers. "Could you not be a drama queen girl for forty five seconds?"

She huffs, and crosses her arms over her chest.

Derek sighs, "Oh come on, I was enjoying the view."

Casey glares and his second sigh is bigger, shuddering and he lets his head loll to the side. "What are we doing?" he looks back at her, exasperated. 'We got mad at each other and we had some good old fashioned angry sex to release the tension,' He drags his hands up and down her legs, "Its not like it hasn't happened before."

Casey cracks a smile.

"I seem to remember it being surprisingly similar," he smirks, "You, jealous of a harmless hockey fan…"

"A girl you invited to your game even though you were sleeping with me," she leans over, their faces are close.

He grins, "We were keeping up appearances!"

Casey narrows her eyes. The tip of her nose touches his: "You let her wear your jersey."

"And you never let me make that mistake again," his breath is heavy in his throat.

Casey's smiling, watching his lips.

"So," he asks, "Can we not make a big deal about it?"

Her back stiffens, and she sits up straight.

"Princess," he chastises, and she stares. "Casey, come on. Let's just let this be something fun that we're doing-we don't have to…" he's stuttering, wordsmithing has never been his game, "I missed you. Is there something so bad about taking this at face value and…"

Her face has gone blank, and there is a slow smile peering at the corners of her mouth.

“And worry about the consequences later…” he looks down at her, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You missed me?”

He stills, this conversation is beginning to feel an awful lot like its entering dangerous f-feelings territory. But he bites his tongue and swallows, “I missed you,” he confirms. Then he grabs her hips and he flips them back over so he’s looking down at her, “I missed you,” he says again, and he touches her face, kisses her nose, her two cheeks and then her mouth.

She knows him. She knows herself. And like this, naked, with their chests touching where they breathe, eyes closed and bodies humming, she definitely knows them. And if that isn’t an admission of Something-Casey swallows her doubt and when he pulls back just to look at her. She meets Derek’s eyes and knots her fingers in the short hair at the base of his skull, “I missed you too.”

…

Wes and Kate are back at their table. Casey’s purse is there, but the girl is nowhere in sight. Moments later, Vicktor returns to the table and takes a seat.

“Casey can out dance the best of us, huh?” Kate asks, “Is she still on the floor?”

“No, she ran off about half an hour ago. She and Derek were—” Vicktor shakes his head, “Those two are weird,” and he returns his attention to his drink.

Kate looks at Wes, a slow grin creeping across her face. Wes rolls his eyes and gestures to Vicktor, “Go on,” he mutters, “give him the second degree.”

She smiles then, big and wide and turns back to Vicktor and affects a casual tone that sounds very not casual, “What do you mean they ran off?”

“I dunno. We were dancing, and then out of the blue she apologizes and turns around and starts kissing Derek,” he looks at Kate, who’s gripping the edge of the table with white knuckles, ‘then she ran off.’ He fidgets with his glass, “Derek followed her,” he adds in afterthought.

“They kissed? Do you realize what this means?”

Vicktor meets Kate’s eyes, “No, I don’t.”

“No. Of course you don’t.”

“Alright,” he nods, and stands up, “Well, I’m going to go and dance with someone who’s not interested in hooking up with someone else.”

After he leaves, Kate turns back to Wes, “They kissed.”

“She ran away.”

“He went after her.”

Wes rolls his eyes, a smile on the corner of his lips.

“Okay, okay. I had my moment.” Kate looks back at him, “Let’s go dance.”

…

Casey sits on the desk and draws her knees to her chest. Her hair is down, her eyes are bright. His name is back where it belongs, stamped across her shoulders, his team named on her chest. At some point in the night, she put her underwear back on, a sassy pair of cheekies that make her ass, if possible, look even better.

And he’s sprawled across the bed, spread eagle, his briefs low on his hips-the black cotton fabric in stark contrast with the light on his skin.

“So, I’m stuck in this dead-end job,” Casey peers over the apex of her knees, “Well, you can imagine—”

“You’re stuck in a dead-end job now,” he picks up his head long enough to lock eyes, and then pops back down.

“I’m not,” she huffs, and looks down at him on the bed, “There’s actually room for growth at *Sports Section*.”

“But you don’t like it,” he’s insistent, and for a moment, her face falters.

“You’re ruining my story.”

“You’re story is boring.”

Casey hops off the desk and onto the bed, hands near his head and her face only inches from his, “You have the attention span of a gnat.”

He looks down her shirt, “Your tits look great from this angle.”

“You’re a Neanderthal,” she fires back, but doesn’t move.

Derek is smirking, and Casey finds herself smiling too. They touch noses, and then he kisses her, and she plops down alongside him on the bed. Together, they look at the ceiling; the only sound between them the air in their chests.

“So, hot shot, if you think you can do better, tell me your story.”

“Nuhuh. We tried that already. If you remember correctly, it didn’t end so well.”

“Right,” she bites, “Well just blame that one entirely on me.”

“It was your fault,” he says it matter of fact and she doesn’t argue, just lays beside him in silence.

Derek lifts his head, props himself up by and elbow and looks Casey up and down.

Eventually, she meets his gaze, her face pensive. “When did you decide to go for it?”

His face is blank.

“How did you know,” she tries, “that you were going to go for it? That no matter what happened, you were going to do everything in your power to get into the NHL?”

“Second year in university,” there’s no hesitation, and she’s surprised he’s actually letting her in. “It was after you—” he stops, they don’t look at one another, and then he moves on. “We were playing U of T. You didn’t see any of those games-but those motherfuckers were brutal—”

“Most penalty minutes in the entire Canadian university league,” she fills in, and then explains, “I went to a lot of your games in our first year.”

He nods, and plows forward, “It was the middle of the second period. We were already on the power play, one of their guys was in the box for high-sticking or something stupid, and we were up a goal. It was low stakes, really, but—”

“But you certainly weren’t going to give them the option of catching up.”

“I had the puck on a breakaway just as their penalty was ending.” He closes his eyes, “He timed it fucking perfectly-I’m skating past the bench, and he gets back on the ice. He was behind me. I didn’t see anything coming.”

Beside him, Casey sits up. He ignores the movement of the mattress and continues.

“Didn’t even come out with his stick, he just rammed his elbow into the skin between my shoulders, hard. I landed face first in the boards.”

Casey grabs his wrist, her fingers tight around the bone.

“There was blood everywhere, just pouring out of my mouth.”

The air hisses between Casey’s teeth when she sucks in a breath, sharp.

“They stopped play-they always do when there’s blood. But I already had my gloves off, my arms wrapped around his neck, and every single one of my team mates was on the ice around us… He knocked out two of my teeth.”

He turns for a minute to glance at Casey. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is twisted.

“I held them in my mouth, I could feel the space where they had come from.”

She holds his wrist with both hands, and she looks down at him intently.

“And by the time the refs got in the fight and broke us up, I was light headed. And without all of the bodies around to keep me on my skates, I fell over, vomiting all on the ice because of all the blood I’d swallowed.”

“But your teeth,” Casey whispers.

“Someone picked them up,” he dismisses, “That was hardly the point. I didn’t even care.”

“You?” she drops his hand, “You didn’t care that you might lose your teeth? For all your shit about your sex appeal—”

A smile starts across his face.

“—and all of the stock you put in your looks, your ability to charm, all of that, everything you have always been about-especially then…” she trails off.

“I was screaming at them in the ambulance. I wanted back out onto the ice. I wanted to give him a reason to hit me-beat his damn team ten to one.”

Casey shakes her head wildly, unbelieving.

He grins, holds her hand for himself, “They had to strap me down. And if they hadn’t, I’d have been back out there in a second—”

“But your teeth, Derek.”

“—Didn’t matter,” he looks at her, hands folded behind his head, one leg bent at the knee looking like a goddamn Adonis stretched out on the sheets waiting for her to get it. And he watches it dawn on her in the way her expression smoothes and softens, “That’s when you knew. When hockey became more important than your teeth.”

He nods.

Instantly, Casey is back to shaking her head, “I don’t know if that’s the most beautiful or most pathetic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s beautiful.”

She cocks an eyebrow and twists her head.

“It’s beautiful. And the only reason you can’t see that is because you want it so badly.” When she doesn’t answer, he presses forward. ‘You’re jealous, because you no longer have something to love more than you love yourself.’ She starts to speak, and he cuts her off, “You used to and you probably still do, if only you could find it again.”

“I write,” she says, “I was writing-it just got so slow—”

“Not writing, writing is your job. Where did your passion go?”

She looks away, folds in on herself and for someone who loves feelings as much as she does, Casey’s awfully afraid of her own.

“When was the last time you were in a dance studio?”

She looks at him meaningfully and then she nods, “Not since I left Canada.”

“You ran away from everything,” and Derek’s surprised by the stab of sympathy he feels at the thought, and he rolls over. Casey’s on the edge of tears so he gathers her into his arms. He holds her close, her back to his chest and his head tucked alongside her. ‘Jesus. it’s been five years, Casey,’ he whispers as he draws a palm up the outside of her naked thigh, “No wonder you’re so high strung.”

Her laughter cuts into her throat in the middle of a sob and then it’s infectious. Her giggle rolls out of her like dandelion petals in summer breeze. Casey grabs him by the sides and squeezes in the only spot he’s ticklish. “You always know just what to say, don’t you?” But it comes out choppy and she’s not sure he even understood her, because he’s doubled over, kicking his legs out, practically shrieking trying to avoid her hands.

“Please, Casey,” he says on repeat until his head is burrowed in the score of pillows at the top of the bed. But they’re both laughing in big, gasping breaths, and Casey can’t much see past the stream of tears leaking from her eyes. His hair has fallen in front of his face and he

has managed to stuff most of his left leg underneath the duvet that's pulled pin-drop tight across the king-sized mattress. Casey grabs him by the wrists, and for a second, his laughter stops, and his body stills. Casey swings a leg over his torso and straddles his chest. She moves with each breath he takes, keeps him pinned by the wrists above his head with one hand and uses the other to push the hair out of his eyes.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi." She lets go of his hands, but he doesn't move and they look at each other, until their breath is the only sound in the room. Derek swallows. Casey draws her fingers along the outlines of his skin and around them, time slows. Goosebumps spread down his shoulder and across his chest and beneath her, he shivers. Casey smoothes them away switching from fingertips to the warm flat of her palm, held tight across all of the planes of muscle just beneath the skin.

He draws his legs up behind her, knees bent, thighs pressed to her back just to steal some of her warmth. Derek plays with the hem of her jersey and whenever his fingers graze across her bare skin. She feels it in her bones, and she keens, holding him between her knees, on top, in charge, as they take this time to remember one another. It's the way her hipbones fit in the crook of his hand and how she smiles when he digs his thumbs into the hollow and dips the rest of his fingers inside of her underwear. He pushes her back, sitting up as she moves, moving her to where he needs her most.

When she lands on Derek, the soft press of her on him, he sighs, deep, intentional and euphoric. He holds her face as she gasps, gentle. The noise surprises her and she laughs, his name dropping from her lips like a prayer.

He kicks out a leg and he flips them, his hands on the bed around her shoulders. He pushes her jersey up, out of the way until her breasts are peeking out of the

bottom, "Time to deliver on that promise?" He asks between wet kisses on her stomach, the peaks of her hips bones and the swell of her tits.

Casey hold her fingers in his hair, keeping it out of his eyes, "Absolutely," she drags her fingers down the outside of his arms, "But you're not going to win."

"So we're playing this game again?" he pulls his hands down the inside of her thighs, parts her legs and settles between them. He changes his voice; it dips lower and feels like velvet on her skin, 'You've been dating those sensitive types, haven't you?' He doesn't meet her eyes, and Derek doesn't wait for an answer; he continues his assault on her body. "The ones who will go to the ballet with you," his breath on her chest, "the boys that will take you to art house foreign films," his fingers tracing patterns, "the intellectuals," he bites her side, near where her ribcage narrows into her waist. "They'll stimulate your mind," he swipes his tongue across the wound, and a whimper catches in her throat.

"That's important!"

He flicks his thumbs across her nipples and pushes his hands along the outside of her, down to hold her ass. "They've all written you love poems."

"You'd never write me a love poem."

“They’ve all touched you here,” he looms over her, pressing a kiss to her forehead-their lower halves aligned continuing as if he hasn’t heard her. ‘Here,’ he says again, his palm underneath her bangs, and then he brushes the sweep of hair from her eyes, “I’ve touched you here.” Derek traces his path with his tongue from his start between her breasts, down and around her navel, across the flat plane beneath until the lace meets her skin.

With his face only inches from her, his mouth on her inner thigh, he meets her eyes. “The difference between them and me? I’m going to touch you here.”

Desperate, “*Please*.”

And Derek draws a hard line up the center of the wet spot on her panties.

She can’t feel her fingers or her toes, her mind is blank and there are a thousand pin pricks of bliss in every inch of her, like he’s set fire to her skin, ripped raw emotion from her throat.

Derek tears off her underwear in a single, reverent motion. And then he looks at her, from between her legs, his smirk electric. “You’re right.” He holds her cheek, certain that she will understand. “I will never write you a love poem.”

Casey nods, clipped, her eyes closed, “Please-shut up. I don’t ca—”

He holds a finger to her lips: “But there is only one thing you need to know—”

She stills. The breathe, Casey keens, “Derek.”

“I—” he stutters and she smiles, reassuring, “I’m really glad you came tonight,” he says.

Casey touches her cheek to his, “Really? Because I don’t think I’ll be really happy until I come again.”

He pulls back, stares her down, his mouth twisted and trying not to smile.

Casey matches his look, “Come on, baby.” she taunts, looking up at him from her perch among all of the pillows, “Put your money where your mouth is.”

…

I’m sorry. I know you want more. Tell me how much you want it.

Seriously though, I don’t think you all understand how much it means to me that you keep coming back for more on this one. And I really don’t think you’ll know how much it’ll mean to me if you leave me a review. Seriously-school is kicking my ass, and I love it. But it’d be a great pick me up to hear a little love/crit in the inbox from you.

In case you didn’t get it the first four times, please review.

Chapter 16

Hello! Many many apologies at how long this took. And a (possibly) empty promise that I'll update quicker from now on. Hope you enjoy it!

…

In the morning, when the sun paints lines across his face from where it peaks in between the blinds, Casey sits cross-legged on top of the bed tracing patterns on his chest.

"You know, some people would consider this creepy."

Casey pulls her hand away, but Derek catches her wrist and cradles it against his chest before he open his eyes and smiles at her. He kisses the tips of her fingers and it feels, tentatively, just like it did six years ago, with all of the uncertainty, but none of the pain. Casey giggles when he bites her index finger and then swings a leg over so that she's straddling him. "It's a good thing you're not some people." She splays one warm palm across his pectoral muscle and smiles.

There is a knock on the door. Simultaneously, they freeze, go bug-eyed, contract their hands into fists and hiss, "Hide." Then Derek catches Casey's eye, and they laugh. 'Just a minute,' Casey calls. "But seriously, Derek," she whispers, pulling him out of bed. Casey slips on a robe from where it hangs on the bathroom door. He gathers her to him, slipping a hand beneath the folds of fabric and drawing his lips to her ear. "Don't keep me waiting."

He steps into the bathroom, and smiling, she opens the front door.

It's Kate. "Hey, sleeping beauty. You left your bag down at the bar last night." She hands over her friend's behemoth leather shoulder bag and eyes Casey.

"Oh, shoot!" Casey exclaims. Her robe slips off her shoulder when she reaches for the bag. "God, thank you so much."

Kate giggles. "What are you, naked under there?"

Casey blinks, "On twelve-hundred thread count sheets? Hell yeah."

They stand in silence for a moment, Casey grinning in false innocence. Kate lasts the space of two breaths before she snaps. "Oh my *god*, Case. Do I have to ask?"

Grinning, Casey asks, "Hmm? Ask what?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me, Missy." Kate puts her hands on her hips. "Vicktor told us *everything* after you ditched him on the dance floor last night."

Casey can feel her cheeks starting to warm. "Everything?"

Kate crosses her arms over her chest. "You kissed Derek."

"I did?" Casey can barely contain her smile.

Then from the bathroom: “HeadCase? You can tell Kate to go away now. I’m getting impatient.”

“Casey,” Kate’s words sound strained coming out around the smile stealing across her face. “Is that Derek in your bathroom?”

Casey bites her lip.

“Derek?” Kate approaches the door. “Why are you in Casey’s bathroom?”

He pops his head out, and its entirely apparent that he isn’t wearing any clothes. Kate looks back at Casey, mouthing the words *Oh My God*. “Well?” she addresses Derek.

“I needed a shower,” he says.

“And what’s wrong with your shower?”

“Well,” Derek says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, “Casey’s not in my shower.” And then he smirks, lopsided and devilish, and Casey’s stomach turns upside down.

“So, Kate. I’ll meet you in the lobby at noon?” Casey begins to usher her friend out the door. “That should be enough time to catch the one o’clock train.” And she shuts the door to the hotel room without waiting for an answer. Casey walks toward the bathroom, dropping her robe on the way.

“Damn, girl.” Derek exaggerates his tone. He bites his lip at her reaction, trying to keep his laughter at bay. “I like it when you’re feisty.”

“Shut the fuck up, Derek,” she says, but kisses him before all of the words are out of her mouth.

…

They flash across the South Jersey inside of the silver bullet body of an Amtrak car. Casey flicks through the book on her lap in between catching Kate peering at her from over the top of her magazine. “Will you stop grinning at me like that?” Casey snaps her book shut and glares at her friend. Kate hasn’t stopped looking at her since the moment she stepped into the lobby of their hotel, and she doesn’t know how much longer she continue to ignore her friend’s obvious begging for details. That girl would be a nothing little spit of a reporter without her love of wheedling all the best gossip out of people.

Kate quirks her eyebrows. “Looking at you like how?”

“Like you know what I did last night.” Casey glares, chewing on the inside of her lip.

“How could I know?” Kate practically leans out of her seat in her desperation. “You’ve given me exactly zero details of you night of passion with Derek. What kind of best friend are you?”

Casey puts her book on the seat beside her. “Okay,” she says, her smile wide now. “What do you want to know?”

…

When they finally reach New York, Kate and Casey hop a subway down to Chelsea, overnight bags from Philly and everything, for a very late brunch, where they sit amongst a plethora of stylish couples and English bulldogs. Sometime after the second bloody mary, Casey's phone lights up with a text message from Derek.

Coach has us scheduled for practice all nite. Sorry, princess.

Casey smiles hard, so Kate snatches the phone out of her hand, emboldened by all the vodka and v8.

"He called you princess," Kate gushes. "See? It *is* an endearment."

"Oh, it's totally an insult," Casey says, but cannot hid the grin planted firmly on her face.

Kate starts when the phone vibrates, but she swipes it open, entering Casey's passcode like and old pro.

"Hey! Give me that."

Game tomorrow? It reads. *Tix waiting for you + Kate box office.*

"Oh, this is so fun," Kate trills. "We get to be puck bunnies together now!"

Casey grabs her friend's hands, "Let's get one thing straight, Miss Do-I-Buy-The-White-Jersey-or-the-Blue-One."

A sheepish smiles crosses Kate's face.

"I am *not* a puck bunny," Casey insists.

Kate throws her arms wide, almost knocking the hat off the woman next to her. "We're sleeping with Rangers," she declares, the name running reverently out of her mouth, "For god's sake, Case. Won't you just enjoy it with me?"

…

Before the game Sunday afternoon, Derek cradles his phone, smiling.

Wes snaps a towel in his teammate's direction. "Your bunny's here, then?"

Over the edge of the screen, Derek glares at Wes. "Casey's not a puck bunny, Wesley."

He cracks a smile. "No, of course not. She comes to the games for love of the sport, not because she's sleeping with the third-string center."

"Oh, fuck off." Derek smirks. "I've met Kate. What did she call a slapshot at dinner? A slamstick?

"Oh come on," Wes bumps Derek's arm. "It's adorable."

Derek claps his friend on the back, "Yeah, Wes, sure it is. C'mon, if we ever expect to not be third sting forwards, we better get out on the ice."

…

With his linesmen at his side, Derek crashes into the bench to shouts of admiration from his teammates and the uproar of support from the fans. Three minutes into the first period, he

locked eyes with Casey in the stands, much closer to the rink now than when she was in the press box, and shot the puck into the net, sailing over the goalie's left shoulder to the tune of several thousand shouts of joy from the stands. The team is energized by the score, and on the bench team captain Daniel nods in Derek's direction, "Nice shot, rook. Keep it up and we'll have to move you up a line."

Derek bows his head in thanks and slings his arms over the boards. He watches his teammates zip back and forth across the ice, waiting-the energy of his score rushing through him like a throughway-for another shot at the goal.

…

Kate chats up a trio of middle-aged guys sitting behind her and Casey, who are explaining the intricacies of the Ranger's strategy to her as if they themselves were coaches of the team. She keeps cutting in to get them to explain a hockey term or a specific rule to her, which they happily oblige, while Casey is pressed practically nose to nose with the glass around the rink, her eyes glued to the puck. She watches as Derek weaves in and out of the red, white and blue Jerseys of the Washington Capitals. As the season draws closer to the playoffs, every game is more important, and as a result, all of the players are on edge. Fans have been on their feet the whole time. The Caps are playing hard, but the Rangers are relentless.

The opposition slides the puck back and forth in the Ranger's zone. Derek hovers on the edges of gameplay for one minute that drags into two. Just before the line is about to be switched out, Derek spots his opening, and he takes the puck down the ice with Capitals skaters at his heels. Casey presses her hands up agains the glass two, hissing back at Kate. "Will you look at this, puck bunny? He's about to score!" The stands are roaring; people are pounding their feet.

Derek crosses the red and lines up his shot, pulling back his stick and slapping it to the side of the puck. Casey feels the crowd around her, all clenching their fists, shoulders up around their ears, hoping.

"And Venturi scores!" shouts the one of the announcers from high above the ice. The cheering is frenetic; the arena is in madness and they are up by one. The Rangers players surround Derek in a cloud of blue and red. 'That's Derek Venturi,' the second commentator chimes in, "newest Rangers acquisition, with the first and second score of the night."

Kate is practically beside herself screaming. "God, could you imagine if he actually scored three?" She bounces on the balls of her feet. "All in one game? That's a thing, isn't it? Like a turkey? What's it called?"

"Hat trick," supplies one of the men sitting in back of them.

"Thank you," she breathes, and directs her attention at Casey. "Come on, Case, you know him. Do you think he can do it?"

Her palms are beginning to form a kind of cohesion with the glass. Derek is on his victory lap, nearing the spot where she is fused to the boards. "I don't know," she says. 'They're pretty rare.' As he skates past, Derek trails his fingers along the glass in front of her, catches her eye, and smirks like he's caught her sneaking Truman into her bedroom back home. And his excitement leeches into her, strong and burgeoning like a balloon of hope in her chest. Once he breaks eye contact, Casey looks over her shoulder at Kate. "Yeah, he's gonna do it."

…

He cuts it close. The last goal comes in just under the gun in the third period of the tied game, after a long string of close calls and miraculous saves by the Ranger's goalie. The clock is reaching zero, the fans are all standing, pounding their feet. It's so easy, since the rule change to just let the game slip into overtime, but Derek wants the glory, not the routine goal made to seal the deal. So when his team finally flings the puck away from the zone, he motions to Wes, who rushes to get it before it crosses completely to the other side of the ice. And he's on the blond's tail, looking for the opening, he traps the pass, and sends it directly into the net before the Capital defense can even get into place.

"Not only is it the game winner, but a very unexpected hat trick from Derek Venturi."

"Yeah, we won't know for sure until his post-game interview," cuts in the second announcer, "but surely a performance like that means Venturi's good luck charm is in the audience tonight."

…

And this time, when Derek looks up into the stands on this victory lap, she is there, the one face he's always wanted to see.

…

Ahh, wouldn't that just be a beautiful ending to their whole story? But don't you worry, I haven't completely forgotten all of those plot points I placed down a couple of chapters ago. You might do well with a refresher of the last handful of chapters, wink wink.

Come one, come all, come down to review. And yell at me to get into the habit of updating faster.

Chapter 17

Hello again! So, my dirty little secret is that I've always hate the name Trade *for this little future-fic epic I've been penning. I knew it was a working title and I struggled to find a new one, but the inspiration to spend a little quality time with the Hockey Term Glossary didn't hit me until last night.*

So from now on, Trade will be called Changing on the Fly. *And I have no idea how a title change will affect your alerts, so just be on the lookout for that new name if you're still reading with me.*

Love to you all, and love to your reviews. Here's the next installment:

…

"Nice game tonight, Venturi," Captain Daniel takes the bench across from Derek just as he's slipping the last of his discarded gear back into his duffel. "So do I get to go congratulate Coach or the good luck charm for the improvement?"

Derek cocks his head to the side.

"Oh, come on," Daniel prompts. "Do you listen to what any of the commentators are saying about you?"

"Honestly? Not really. It's like a whirlwind out there doing the post game interview. I can hardly remember what I said, let alone the press."

"It's been going on ever since you and that girl made eyes at one another-you know, during that interview after your first game?"

Blinking, Derek sputters, "Casey? The commentators have been talking about her?"

"Well, yeah. Everyone who wasn't there has seen that video of the two of you sneaking off together. You and your lucky charm are talk of the hockey town, rookie."

"I thought no one gave a shit about hockey players in the City."

"They don't. But one thing you've gotta understand about the American public is that they're suckers for a good love story, and besides," he says with a shove to Derek's shoulder, "football season's over."

…

When she looks up from her phone Monday morning, to find her face on the cover of a tabloid, Casey jumps up out of her seat on the subway, heart pounding. She practically has to bite her fist to keep from snatching it out of the passenger's hands. She probably looks predatory, but she definitely looks completely insane when she leans over and asks the total stranger-breaking every cardinal rule of commuter hour on the train— "Do you mind if I see that for a second?" The woman doesn't even look up from the magazine. It's not rude; it's New York.

So Casey touches the top of the magazine, even though she hates herself for doing it. “Excuse me?” she tries again, louder this time. ‘I’m so sorry.’ She makes sure she has eye contact before continuing. “Really sorry, but do you mind if I borrow that for a second?”

The woman blinks at her. She offers up nothing. She’s good; got a least ten years of veteran New York subway conduct under her belt.

“It’s just—” Casey cuts in, trying to plead her case. “I really don’t mean to bother you. But I think I’m on the cover of that magazine, and I just want to know why.”

The woman flips back to the cover, and then eyes Casey from behind her sunglasses. “Oh, so you’re her, aren’t you?”

People are starting to look up from their phones. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees a few commuters pull out one of their ear buds.

“I’m who?”

“Lucky charm to the newest hockey player in town. They are trying to decide,” she gestures to the article inside, ‘Whether or not you two are seeing each other. Something about long lost lovers reunited. “Then the woman rolls her eyes.” But you know all that, don’t you? You’re living it, I guess.’ She looks up from the article. “Honestly, slowest fuckin’ news day ever, if you ask me. Can’t wait ’til football comes back and we have some dirt on athletes I actually give a shit about.” But by the end of her tirade, she is still holding onto the magazine, seemingly without any intention of handing it over.

Casey bites her lip. “So, can I see the magazine?”

“Oh, good *shit*, darling. Sure, enjoy your fifteen minutes.” And the woman gives it to her with a dismissive flick of her wrist.

With a grateful smile, Casey retreats to her seat on the train.

…

She’s stopped in the hallway at MSG by a six-foot-everything ball player walking out of the locker rooms in front of her. “Well, well, if it isn’t our favorite lady reporter. We haven’t seen you ’round here in a while, though that can’t be true, can it?”

“Yeah, Marshall,” Casey nods, and his dark eyes twinkle. “I missed you too. They got Kate covering The Knicks now, no way you’re missing me.”

“Little Lady Katie.” He shakes his head, “Yeah, we’d like her a lot more if she was as good as you pretending she actually gives a shit about Basketball.”

“I do give a shit about Basketball!” Casey says, and Marshall looks at her sideways. “Sorry, Marsh. My beat got switched. If it was up to me, I’d only be coming to visit you in MSG, you know that.”

“Yeahuh, sure,” Marshall drawls, “Don’t play games with me, girly; I saw the news. I know you’re cozying up to your long-lost hockey beau.”

“Oh god.” Casey shakes her head. “Has everyone on the planet seen that article?” Casey’s blood thrums hot through her veins. Michael fucking Morgan and that traitor Ricky and the

tale of star-crossed lovers they were so desperate to spin for their shitty rag. “I thought I’d be safe in hockey, you know it’s like the forgotten sport of New York.”

“You look like you’re out for blood.”

Casey grits her teeth. She balls her hands into fists and works hard at modulating her breathing. She doesn’t need everyone and his mother knowing just how big of a shit storm this could be for them. “Yeah, they didn’t exactly print that article with my permission.”

“They never do.” Marshall looks at her with solemn eyes. “Sucks everytime.”

Casey rolls her eyes in sympathy, “Are the Rangers around? I need to talk to Rookie before I leave for a lunch meeting.”

“Naw.” Marshall shakes his head. ‘They took off earlier. Coach went easy on them after their win last night. You could hear them crowing about it all morning. But they’ve been gone for a while; they’re almost done laying down the court over the ice. In fact,’ he says, dropping one of his toddler-sized hands on her shoulder, “I gotta get back. Good to see ya, kid. And good luck with Rookie; you two looked cute on the cover,” he winks, and then Marshall turns around, headed back to the lockers.

Casey pinches runs her fingers through her hair.

Maybe if she gets to him before he sees it, the fallout won’t be nearly as horrible. At least that’s what she’s thinking, as she blows up her cellphone calling all of her afternoon interviews to reschedule. But she chickens out, with her fingers over the call button after his number, and she texts Derek instead. *Busy this afternoon? I have some time; would love to see you.* Then she crosses her fingers and has to consciously remind herself not to curl up into the fetal position as she waits.

She’ll play it off cool: “Did you see the news this morning?” Then she’ll pull out subway woman’s copy of the article.

Casey fingers the magazine in her bag. It is mostly her face on the cover-a shot someone must have snuck at that stupid post game interview where he’d first called her his good luck charm. It was when they were arguing. Only they’d caught her mid-forced-smile, Derek’s arm around her waist as he lead her to the back. His face was close to her ear, and damn if that plastered-on grin she was wearing didn’t look entirely, genuinely euphoric.

Her stomach clenches at the memory. After he sees the it, that’s what their relationship would be reduced to. Arguing post-interview in the bowels of Madison Square Garden.

“Funny, you know,” she would joke as his eyes raked over the cover. “You’re the famous one, but I’m pretty sure if we measured, my face takes up 85% of the cover real estate.”

But would she be able to tell him that she knew they were writing this article? And would Derek believe her when she said she had conveniently forgotten until 48 hours after she slept with him?

Casey swallowed. The timing couldn’t have been a more perfect disaster than if she outright planned her demise herself. Next to her, Casey’s phone buzzed, and the screen came jumping to life.

Apartment hunting. Please come with. I don’t know what I’m doing.

Casey bites her lip. It isn't fair. She'll help him into a beautiful place that she'll unavoidably fall in love with, but could never afford on her own, and they'd play out the fantasy for the Realtor, because who was she to argue when the stranger would inevitably consider them to be dating, or heaven forbid married and then—

Where should I meet you? She asks.

Realtor's at 53 and Lex.

And of course Casey recognizes the address, and then the name on the door once she gets there. They deal exclusively in upper class extravagance.

Moving to New York turns even the least savvy house-hunter into an real-estate-obsessed harpy in two point six seconds. Reports have it that something like sixty percent of the city's dwellers have had, or frequently have dreams about finding secret rooms in their apartments. And with a city-wide delusion as common as that, it's a wonder people still agree to live in shoeboxes for a shot at that 212 area code.

She winces when she opens the door, spotting Derek dutifully filling out forms on a clipboard in a corner of the plush waiting area. And she waits, on her toes, for his reaction to seeing her.

Derek's face brightens when they make eye contact. "Oh, thank god," he effuses. "I wasn't kidding when I said I had no idea what I was doing. They want a list of neighborhoods, and I've barely been outside of the Garden since I've gotten here, and all I know is I don't want to live there."

Casey shushes him. Her relief is practically palpable, but luckily he's distracted enough not to notice. "Good lord, D. I got it." Then she proceeds to quiz him on what, precisely, it is he doesn't like about the neighborhood surrounding the Garden-the noise, the filth: "It's like a suburban strip mall with all of those cheap shops and lunch takeout places"-and then directs him to the sections of Manhattan he'd be more likely to enjoy.

But he's not paying much attention. Derek only has eyes for Casey, and they're glazed over watching her. He's not checking off the neighborhoods as she runs down her list. When she starts to notice, her voice trails off. "Derek, you're not circling."

He smiles, and then blinks slowly. "Hi. I missed you." Derek touches the tips of her hair where the strands cascade down her shoulders.

He looks so hopeful. He can't have seen the article yet. Casey swallows. "Oh, give me the pen. Let me fill it out." She completes the section and passes him back the clipboard so he can fill out his financial details and sits on her hands, forcing the air to pass through her lungs in long, even breaths.

At that moment, Casey looks out across the waiting area. She can see the tip of the Empire State Building sticking out above the rest of the skyline, and just beyond it, the unfinished top of the new Freedom Tower. She might have moved to this city to run away from troubles at home, but there's nothing like that view that'll convince Casey-and the millions like her-that anything's worth the price of admission to live within the limits of a city that looks like this.

Derek finishes signing the papers with a flourish. Casey catches his eye. He flashes another smile and the reaches over to squeeze her hand.

But wouldn't it be nice to be him; to have the view and this city and all that goes with it in the kind of sprawling apartment a hockey salary could afford. She knows he worked hard to get where he is today, but Derek really has no idea just how good he has it.

…

Inside of the realtor's cubicle, Casey, with Derek's hand on her knee, leads the discussion on where Derek wants to live.

It's all very convenient that she hasn't had a chance to bring up the magazine article yet, but then before she knows it, they're off, walking to the first place the Realtor wants to show. They step through the sprawling lobby, with it's uber-mod furniture and a smiling doorman. There are bellhop luggage carts like it's a goddamn hotel and then they are in the elevator and then the hallway, carpeted, lit softly by sconces.

The Realtor is at the entrance to one of the penthouses. The door swings open and Casey gasps. She's drawn to the windows like a moth to flame. The walls are glass from floor to ceiling, the whole apartment is long clean lines, pristine and absolutely obscene. It's one of the lesser penthouses, so she has to press her face to the glass and squint to the right to see Central Park, but she loves New York for the skyscrapers, not the trees, so straight out over the southern skyline is the perfect view nonetheless.

"Derek," she keens, walking past the white marble kitchen bar that grandstands over the living room.

He stands in the middle of the room, awestruck. He watches her, and Casey's positive he hasn't so much as glanced at the view.

"I'll be in the hall if you have any questions," the Realtor bows out of the space gracefully, leaving them to ponder the possibility of the space.

…

He trails along after her as she flits excitedly through the rooms. Casey stops bouncing only when they hit the bathroom, standing in the walk-in shower, staring at all of the nozzles, and then out in front of the sink, running her fingers reverently over the counter.

Derek looks at her in the mirror, smiling. "You know, I took you for more of a traditionalist. Thought you'd swoon over a place with a little more character. Some New York exposed brick, and rattling radiator in the corner?"

She looks up, taken aback by the sentiment of the statement. But she's also touched. "Oh, of course I'm a traditionalist. But even I can't deny you a place like this. All of the modern amenities, the gadgetry." She flips around to face Derek. 'It's the perfect bachelor pad.' She takes him by the hand and leads him back into the kitchen. He's quiet for once, and with her nerves, Casey strives to fill the silence. "The fifth floor walk-up life is charmed, but that's just a lie we tell ourselves to get through until we've forgotten last month's rent payment."

He looks at the stove; not top of the line, per say, but certainly high range than he'll ever need. "Case, it's gorgeous, but I'm not really looking for a bachelor chic anymore."

Slowly, Casey shuts the upper cabinet she was peering into. She looks at Derek, the question on her lips.

He walks her up against the counter; his fingertips drawn up and down her forearms, his lips by her ear. “You know, I was thinking of a place more for the two of—”

She knows what he’s going to say. It’s a dream on his lips, even before the offer is past his teeth, but she can’t. Casey cannot let him get that far when she is seconds from screwing up the courage to break everything.

“Derek,” she says. One hand on his chest, and the other reaching into her bag, left forgotten on the counter. “Listen, did you walk past a newsstand today?” She pushes the tabloid into his hands and waits for his reaction, and it’s slow, as his eyes take in the cover, brow furrowing, and silently, he flips it open.

Casey retreats away from the kitchen and down the window-walled hallway that leads to the bedroom. Two of the four walls are glass and there is a built-in unit opposite of where the bed would be, and a long closet space with mirrored doors tucked into the corner of the final wall, just alongside the master bathroom.

“That’s a view I don’t think I could ever get used to waking up to.” He says, walking in behind her a few minutes later.

Casey sets her jaw, pressing her palms even harder on the glass; the writing side of her basking in the literal metaphor of feeling trapped.

“But oh my god, could you imagine, Spacey?” He stalks to the center of the room, standing with his legs spread, pelvis pressed forward, arms wide open.

She turns to look at him. And when he catches her eye, a jaunty boyish grin steals across his face. And his happiness gathers into her, keeping the slow-build ire only just at bay.

“You bring a girl up here to continue a wonderful evening, and she’s on top, and we’re having a great roll in the sack and she’ll look up and see that view and—” he punches his fist into the open palm of his other hand and makes an exploding noise. Then he practically trips over himself laughing on the way to the window. He mirrors her previous posture, hands leaving fingerprints on the glass, though she’s willing to bet his are far less sweaty. “Oh my god, this is going to be great.”

She flips around, hands on her hips. Her entire being is on fire. “Alright, are you kidding me?” She is not yelling; the Realtor is right outside; she will not raise her voice. “Do you have to rub it in?”

“Woah, Princess.” He throws his hands up. “I am just kidding. Where is this coming from?”

“Did you even read the article?” She is *not* yelling. There is *not* an edge of hysteria creeping into his voice.

“Yeah, so?”

“So?” There is no, no, no hysteria anywhere near here. “*So*?”

“So, I’m assuming you’re not the ‘super secret source close to the couple’ who gave the ‘exclusive interview’-firstly because you wouldn’t do that to us, and we just had sex two days ago, so where would you have had the time and seriously, Case, most of that was bullshit they

just pulled from the stupid video that's been going around. Look, I'm in the public eye, I know stuff like that's going to happen."

He reaches around to scratch the back of his neck. "Though honestly I'm surprised, I mean every damn person has been telling me since the moment I got here that This is New York, and No One Gives a Shit About Hockey Here Anyway, and now like I'm on the cover of a fucking tabloid and you're freaking out about it—"

"Because I know you, Derek," Casey trills. "I know how you feel about public displays of affection-I knew all about your policy back in school and it's not just *you* in the public eye. I'm certainly not as famous as you or as famous as you're about to become, but—" she crosses her arms over her chest. "That's why my editors were so interested in this—"

"Wait, you knew this was happening? What do you mean, 'your editors'?"

"The tabloid is owned by the same company that owns *Sports Section*," she spits. "They called me in as some kind of professional courtesy that they were running with the story—"

"And you're just telling me about it now?"

"I ran away! I ran to Philadelphia to get my mind off everything and then this weekend happened-I mean, I never expected anything, Derek. I didn't want to get you involved before I had to, and with everything that went down, I forgot about it-mission accomplished, I guess. I thought it would all just blow up in their faces when it came out that we were step-siblings, and they'd look the fool and it would all go away, but now—

"*Oh, oh my god*," her voice cracks around the words. Casey closes her eyes. 'Do you know how much worse it's going to look when it gets out now?' She doesn't wait for his answer. "It's going to be like back in Canada, only so, so much worse when they get the whole city involved, and they won't look the fool-they'll look like geniuses for figuring out our secret and—"

"What secret?" Derek barks, "Are you hiding who I am-who we are-from everyone, Casey? It's not illegal! It's hardly even immoral! God, I thought you were over this."

"I know it's not illegal! But that's not the point, the point is-what do you mean, you thought I was over it?"

"We're here in New York. We're older, we're so far away from all of that, from our family and all of those that would out us for no other reason than to watch us squirm. We met when we were fifteen, Casey. *Fifteen*. We were never socialized as siblings. Fuck, it's more embarrassing that we're high school sweethearts than anything else."

"It's always going to come between us," Casey insists.

"You know I thought we could move past this," Derek says, low and dirty and painful with his jaw popping as he clenches his teeth. "But you haven't. And I'm beginning to think you never will. We are miles, states, time zones a whole fucking country away from our parents. You are twenty-eight years old. You are paying your own bills now, you have a career. You've made a whole new life for yourself. You couldn't be any more separate from London."

"I had to! I had to start over!"

“Yeah, you did. You left everything behind. Your family was on the brink of disowning you. You were scared then, and it killed me, but I got it. You were so defiant, so self-assured. Casey, running to New York was the first time I felt you were actually doing something for yourself. I respected your decision because it was the bravest thing you’ve ever done.”

Casey squares her shoulders and stares him back.

“But then you started second-guessing yourself. You stopped fighting for what you wanted. You settled on a career you hate, and you do nothing to get yourself out of it.”

When she tries to speak, he continues over her, louder. “What we have here between us? This is it for me. There is no one else who makes me crazy like you do, Case.” He swallows, looks away, continues in a voice like he can’t believe what he’s saying. ‘I knew it when you kissed me for the first time back in Uni. Hell, if I wasn’t kidding myself, I probably knew it the first time we fought.’ A smirk creeps across his features, then, but Derek shuts it down before it widens into a smile. “But I’m not waiting for you to come around anymore. You know what we have, and you’re running away. *Again.* You’re a coward. Now grow the fuck up.”

…

Oh, those two. I do love pitting them against one another almost as much as I like bringing them together.

Do tell me what you thought and please leave a little review.

Chapter 18

It's a little short, but I'm abroad in London, so it's better than nothing, right?

…

Casey sinks into the floor after Derek slams the front door shut behind him. She can't hear a word they're saying in the hall, just more crushing proof that this is the most beautiful apartment building that she's ever set foot in. She looks at her toes, steadfast in her belief that she cannot throw away everything she's worked for. Casey cannot move cities again, but knowing he's so close, only a short subway ride away and living with that gnawing guilt that she'll never-what is her other option? Standing up, Casey retreats back into the kitchen, running her fingers over the marble.

The Realtor pops he head back the apartment then. "Mr. Ventrui's just told me that an urgent matter has come up. I understand the nature of these things, but really, ma'am, if you like this place, it's priced to go fast. I'd urge you to jump start the paperwork, this property will probably be snapped up by the end of tomorrow."

Casey swallows. Now she's going to be the reason he loses out on the perfect home, too. "I'm sorry. You'll really have to talk to Derek about it. And if he's decided this other issue is more important…" she trails off. 'I told him this place was beautiful, but.' Casey shrugs. "Try calling him before you leave the office this evening, maybe he'll be able to deal with it then?"

"Sure, I'll be certain to do that."

"Thank you for taking the time today." Casey draws herself up to her full height, "But if you'll excuse me, I really should get back to my office."

…

Hours later, after wandering Central Park until his fingers went numb with the cold, Derek goes back to his hotel room, where he collapses on the bed. He hasn't even unpacked since Philadelphia yet. And now, he'd rather just never seen any of that stuff again for the memories-and god, when did he become so sentimental about one damn weekend—

He sits up, reaches into his pocket and dials his sister.

"What's this?" Marti says, voice exaggerated and surprised. 'A phone call from my brother? Why sir, I thought you'd died.'
"You're going to make this conversation absolutely impossible, aren't you?"
"Hi, Smerek. It's nice to talk to you too." But when he doesn't answer, Marti sighs. 'What happened?'
Derek bites the tip of his tongue. "So, Casey came to the game this weekend."
"Good fucking luck charm indeed, you scored a hat-trick," she says and when he's silent again she presses on. 'Something happened.'
"We fought, but it was like before-back home. Then afterwards, we all went out to dinner, did I tell you Wes is dating her best friend? And the idiot invited Viktor to come, you know, cause

he's on our line… it was his victory too. It was a load of shit, and Casey's just flirting with him all night with the sole purpose of getting under my skin—" he cuts himself off and holds his breath.
"Derek," Marti says, and what she doesn't speaks volumes.
'She kissed me. She ran away. I chased her up to her hotel room… Smarts, I pretty much just asked her to move in with me.'
Marti sucks in a breath so quick and loud he can hear it across the country line. "Is this the part where I start squeeing? Or do I need to ship you some ice cream to eat all those f-f-f-feelings?"
"I called her a coward. I told her to grow up. Marti, I'm-I think that I am-I told her that I—"
'I know, D. Don't hurt yourself trying to say it twice in one day. You must have broken that feelings bank, huh?'
"What if she doesn't come around?" His sister is right, he's totally cracked, he can't repress anything now, and everything just come spilling out at once.
"I'm not going to pretend like I think you made the right decision."

"What?"

"They two of you are so goddamn stubborn. Derek, you two are-if you both keep using each other as excuses to stay away… This is the prime of your fucking life. What are you doing wasting your time screwing around with other people?" She stops to catch her breath, but the insults just keep flying, 'God, I just refuse to be as thick headed as you. And I'm not going to play around with this game of yours. And I'm telling Liz to say the same to Casey when she calls.'
"Marti, you don't understand."
"I'm not giving this to you, Derek. You know how you feel. She's scared, and you need to stop yelling at her and get your shit over there and hold her hand. It's one step forward and eighty steps. You're a grown ass adult. And there are literally two people in the entire world who don't want you to be together. And who gives a shit what they think? So yeah, stop being a coward, I agree."
For a second there is silence, and all Derek can hear is the angry beat of his little sister's heart. And then the line clicks and she's gone, and he stares dumbly at the phone in his hand.

…

Later, at work, Casey stares dejectedly at the gray corner of her cubicle and within seconds Kate is there knowing all of Casey's secrets. "What did you do?"

Casey spins her chair around, leaning back, threading her finger together in a nervous tick. "I think we broke up."

Kate plops herself down onto the credenza.

"Why?"

"Always cutting right to the point, aren't you?"

"We're in this different place. We had this heart to heart last night. I mean-today, that was me. It was the article, and I just freaked. But I've been here ever since. I called my sister and she told me I was an idiot and it just got me thinking."

Kate folds her hands in her lap, head cocked. "Start again. Should we go get coffee?"

But Casey's continuing, rolling over Kate like she isn't there. "…to dance in highscool and early college. That's how he knew me and he thinks I've come out here and given up my dream. I never wanted to be an athletic journalist, sure. Look at what we've got, though. A job writing in the biggest city on this planet. I get paid to interview meatheads all day and spin stories about them. And it's like a testosterone nightmare, but people care about what I write, they read it and I get paid. And to tell the truth, I like talking to the meatheads. They've got such a different perspective."

"Yes, I know that—"

"But he's just immediately all about what happened to dancing, why did you give up? I didn't give up, I quit. It wasn't-I started writing, and I'm not a novelist and I'm not goddamn J.K. Rowling, but I've done damn good. I know I'm good, and he came along, and I just. I forgot all of it."

"What does this have to do with—"

"It's not going to work. He still thinks I'm this fragile ballerina. And I still think he's this closed off jock. And I'm scared about how everyone will react—"

"Casey, it's not 1896 anymore."

"But it's not even about that." She throws her hands up, hissing desperately now, "He doesn't think I'm good enough. He doesn't think I'm happy."

"What would make you happy?"

And it's like a sudden moment of clarity, because, when was the last time someone asked her that? When was the last time she banished everything in her head to have a moment where she sat off to the side of her life and though, what, would make her happy? "I want to teach. College students, probably. College students like me, who ran to New York from things, for things, who just want the challenge and something new. I didn't have anyone. I want to be that mentor for someone."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. That's it. I don't think I've ever realized it before. Teaching," Casey nods furiously now. "I want to teach." She locks eyes with Kate.

"You want to teach."

"Where do I teach?"

"I have some contacts at the New School, and you could try NYU-didn't they like you? You're an alumna, at least."

"No, NYU's way too much."

Kate laughs, "Well, if you really want to do this, I'll send you the info for my friend, then."

Casey looks, eyes strong, out over the office. "I really want to try it."

…

Deep in MSG, Derek is on his knees before the toilet retching his guts into the bowl. The have a game on in half an hour. Wes stands a few feet away, leaned up against the counter, arms crossed, looking impossibly cool compared to his teammate. And he's rubbing it in, because he's laughing.

"God, you really fucked this one up, didn't you?"

In response, Derek gags.

…

Casey looks up after she puts the phone back in the cradle. "I think that went really well. I have an interview at the end of the week."

"I know," Kate smiles, "Lisa just texted to tell me how much she loves you already. It's looking good, kid." And then Kate winks, in a way that only she can pull off.

"I haven't been this excited since I came here." Casey bounces in her seat. She reaches for her phone at her side, wanting to tell someone else the good news. She's halfway to dialing Derek before she stops. Two weeks ago, Lizzie would have been the first person on her mind, and now, even after all of that. Derek. It is Derek she wants to share this with.

…

Not only do they lose, but Derek doesn't get a single shot in goal, and a strong argument could be made that it's actually his fault the other team scored.

And while he's busy moping, contemplating suffocation by inside of his foul hockey skate, Wes comes over. He sits on the bench next to Derek, and drops a hand to his teammate's shoulder. "From a hat trick to scoring one on your own team in less than a week."

Derek shoves his elbow into Wes' side.

"I know you don't want to hear it, man, I'm not getting in your business anymore, but what the fuck were you thinking?"

…

Thanks for reading, and thanks bunches for enjoying and bushels for reviewing.

Chapter 19

Little shorty again, but I just had to get this out to you. We're nearing the home stretch now, I think.

Happiest New Year to everyone who's still with me.

…

"So, we're officially on for Friday, then."

Kate looks up over her glass of wine, "Nervous?

"A little."

Shaking her head, Kate says, "You just gotta bring back that wild confidence you had when you decided you wanted to do this. Just imagine you're going in there to tell Derek off."

Casey gives a wry sort of grin. "I don't think that would get me hired."

Kate tips her head, a smile quirking at the corner of her lips.

"And thinking particularly about the last time I told Derek off, I'd be more likely to have a sexual harassment suit on my hands."

Kate drinks to that, and though she wants to, she says nothing more on the subject.

And Casey is content to pontificate on what taking this step could mean for her career anyway. If there is one thing that girl loves, it's exploring every single damn possibility for what could go wrong. She talks absently for a few minutes and Kate studies the clientele in the new swank wine bar, wondering if this would be a good place to bring Wes back to. Perhaps a little too effeminate for a hockey player's taste to be honest. Most of the couples on dates here look like they're having this first go at it. Men who like to play at being metro to impress the socialites they've met online. She's shaken out of her thoughts when she feels Casey staring at here.

"Sorry, what? I got lost people-watching."

"They are an interesting sort, aren't they? We'll have to cross this one off our list, huh?" Casey grins. "Do you think I need to give the boss a heads up about the interview?"

"Yes," Kate responds, swirling the wine in her glass.

Casey makes a face. "Doesn't sound like the best way to keep my job."

"As long as you promise it won't interfere with your work here, which is hardly will. We don't exactly keep a nine-to-five. There are at least six other people in the office who do something similar going on."

Casey cocks one way and then the other. "Yeah, you're right."

“It would probably look a lot worse if it came up later and you didn’t at least let him know.” Kate takes a sip from her glass. “It isn’t like you’re asking for permission. You’re just letting him know. It’s a courtesy I think he’d appreciate.”

“I suppose. I just hate doing that kind of thing. No matter how many times, it always feels like I’m asking permission.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Casey. It’s Tom. You’ll be fine.”

…

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with the pieces you’re assigned, kid.” Tom looks over his computer. “It sounds like a great opportunity.”

“Well, it likely won’t be until the summer. It’s the middle of the semester now, and I can’t imagine they’ll want me on right away.”

Tom nods, “Good, good. You’ll be able to devote yourself to the hockey beat this spring, then.”

When Casey makes no noise in response, he looks up at her. “So I take it you weren’t just saying that about you and that hockey player not being a thing?”

“We are the complete opposite of a thing,” Casey grits out tightly, and tries not to meet Tom’s gaze.

“Wish I could say it would be over soon, but on top of the tabloid traffic they’re trying to build, the higher ups are still really impressed with the profile you did on him. And they’re right to,” Tom softens his tone. “He brought out the best in your writing.”
Casey huffs.

“Yeah, go and throw yourself into that interview, ’cause it’s hockey from here on out as long as you’re at *Sports Section.”*

Thanking her boss, Casey closes the door to his office behind her. She checks her phone- just about time to catch the 123 if she intends to make her interview on time. She walks past Kate on the way out. “Of course Tom is cool with it, but you knew that already.”

“Break a leg, tiger.” Kate gives her a wink before Casey turns on her heel and heads for the elevators. “Thanks, Kate.”

…

Lisa loves her, and Casey has no confidence in her abilities lately, so if she thinks it went well, she knows logically that she must have knocked this one out of the park, er-into the net.

She and Kate grab lunch to celebrate and then Casey has to pack up her stuff and do the walk of I-Don’t-Want-To back up to MSG to cover that evening’s game.

It’s like a frat house common room in the press box when she sits down at her desk. The ice is empty still; a Zamboni zips the surface in long slow stripes.

“Ah, here to lend a little luck to the new star player, are we?”

Casey grins, trying hard not to roll her eyes. “I’m just here to do my job, Josh. Same as you. If it helps the Rangers win, that’s just Yahtzee.” Then she winks and pulls her tablet out of her bag, while making a point not to look up at any of the whispers swirling around her. Though, the fact that she’s trying so hard probably ruins the effect she’s going for, but a girl’s gotta cope the way she can.

The team whips out on the ice then, and like everything else she can’t handle lately, Derek’s moth is immediately drawn to her flame. They lock eyes and Casey shrugs in a What Are You Going to Do kind of way. Derek shakes his head and spends the rest of the warm up like her, pointedly looking away. Well, she supposes, at least she won’t catch him of guard at the press conference, which means, well. This was going to be fun, wasn’t it?

…

Derek doesn’t get put in the game until the end of the first. Likely some kind of unavoidable punishment for ensuring that last game was a losing one. And Derek is slow coming out of the box, but playing relatively well, if not more conservatively than last week. They pass the puck into the zone and then back and forth among themselves until there’s a break, the opposing team falters for a second in their concentration and Derek takes the shot on goal. And for that clutching handful of moments, Casey’s rather annoyed to find her heart in her throat. He misses, and the buzzer sounds for the end of the period, but it is the most promising thing to happen all game, so its hardly any surprise when Derek is thrown in for the on-camera during intermission. The surprise, which she really should have learned to expect by now, is that Casey is the one sitting across from him, entirely and grossly under-prepared. She is a print journalist. She has no idea what all this stage makeup is doing on her face and she doesn’t know where to look until Derek walks into the room, toweling off his hair and shaking like a dog. He’s still in full uniform, of course, and he’s huge. He stops when he sees her, but only for a split-second, then he saunters over to the bench like he’s interviewed by his lov-stepsister everyday

…

They told her to just go for it, but she wasn’t exactly planning on, “So I show up and now you’re playing like you’re actually a member of the team? We all know Lundqvist is the best goalie in the league, Venturi. You don’t need to go proving you’re the best center forward by getting one past the King. You know you’re not supposed to score one on your own team, right?”

“What can I say, lucky charm? You abandoned me in my time of need. I had to do something drastic to get you back.” He’s all smirks and smiles and *sex* and *damn him.*

Casey hates how easily he looks at her. “I can’t be at every single game, D. Time to put on your big boy pants and play hockey like a man.” She quirks up the corner of her lip, daring him to push back.

And he does. “It’s not just about me, the whole team plays better when you’re here—”

Casey hasn’t a single clue if that’s true, because she’s only even noticed him, really.

“—They should just make it so you’re contractually obliged to be at all of the games.” He leans in, conspiratorially, like this is their little secret and their endless dream.

Casey puts her hand on his knee. “Right, because a female journalist in the locker rooms would really help improve your concentration on the game.”

“Oh,” Derek places his hand on top of hers just like don’t push me, I’ll throw it back as good as you give. “No way we’d hide you behind the scenes.”

Casey pulls her hand away, dragging her nails along his thigh, holding his gaze because she cannot possibly look away.

Derek’s electric. “You’d be an official mascot and everything,” all smooth words and class and oozing. “I bet you’d look ravishing in a Ranger’s jersey.” His eyes are daggers.

Casey’s smile freezes on her face and the fire rushing through her veins is magic. “Would you have me in your number eleven? Or would we go traditional in number one?”

He sits back in his chair, everything. “It’s not an eleven, lucky charm.”

“Oh, let me guess. Eleven, or two ones. One, one.” Casey puzzles it out and it’s a wonder the reason for his choice hadn’t dawned before now. “You’re so good you—”

“Had to be number one twice.”

…

He scores a minute and change into the second period on a killer breakaway he pulled of mere breaths after the face off. The crowd is insane. The noise in the arena reaches decibels the television equipment likely cannot handle. And Derek point blank refuses to look up at her. Not that Casey is looking at Derek.

The crowd finishes the victory song and general quiet descends upon the arena again. And the sniggering takes center stage in the press box.

“Lucky charm strikes again.”

“Seriously, McDonald, what are you doing to this guy?”

“Didn’t you see them on all over the newsstand?”

“Star-crossed lover and all, right?” Josh nudges Casey and she shoves him back.

“How many times and I going to have to remind you boys to get back to your jobs? Derek and I are just another set of boring old friends—”

“Fucking like rabbits off camera, no doubt.”

Casey glares, “Oh for god sake, Josh. Get a life.”

…

But post game, in the press conference, they’re back on center stage. Casey gets first dibs on questions, but she rolls her eyes and says something clever like, “Oh, I already got everything I need to know about Venturi’s performance tonight.” Which she immediately regrets saying as soon as the words are out of her mouth, because holy shit, what the hell did that just sound like?

And all of the other reporters start getting snarky with questions like, “How much of tonight’s success can you pin on your lucky charm being here?” and ‘Should we just ask her to be at every game?’ and “Will it work if she teleconferences in?” and “Is it just you? Or will her magic work on the other players too, do you think?”

Derek shrugs them off with grace and humor and he answers every single question looking directly at her, eyes locked, gazing down her soul.

…

Kate slams open her apartment door thirty seconds after Casey gets home. “Are you kidding me with this right now?”

Casey looks at her from over the back of the couch, “With what right now? I just got home!”

“Okay,” Kate places her hands on her hips and then starts pulling wine glasses out of the cabinets. ‘This is clearly a wine conversation, because I am not beating around the goddamn bush all night.’ She grabs a bottle off the rack and starts picking furiously at the seal before jamming the key in the cork and twisting it free out of sheer frustration. “Here,” she shoves the first glass into Casey’s hand, almost sloshing all of the liquid across her blouse in the process. “Drink up.”

Casey takes a tentative sip and moves over on the couch, making room for Kate. “Care to start from the top on this one?”

Her volume’s at 11, “What is wrong with you?”

Casey looks at her expectantly, sipping her wine.

“Miss ‘He’ll never understand me; he just thinks I’m a fragile little ballerina’ goes off and has sex with him on camera in front of the entire Madison Square Garden, I mean, yeah, Casey, you two kept your clothes on but everybody and their blind grandmother could see the way you undressed one another with your eyes. So, I repeat: Are you kidding me with this right now?”

“That wasn’t what it was.” Casey says, levels calmer than Kate. “We’ve always been like that. We banter and we fight and-oh don’t look at me like that,” she slaps Kate’s shoulder, “it doesn’t *mean* anything. I have to interview him and he has to play. We’re both just doing our jobs.”

Kate puts her glass down on the coffee table, still untouched, “Casey,” and she shakes her head, bringing her hand up to hold her own chin. “That’s not what that was.”

“That’s all it was, Kate,” she insists, her voice hard with determination. “That’s all it can be. That’s everything it has to be. Because he won’t stop and if I just-nevermind.”

Kate stares at her, refusing to fill the stretching silence.

“If I stop throwing it back just as hard as he dishes, then I forfeit. I’m not going down with out a fight.”

“God, Case.” Kate sniffs, “I love you, but you are so, so stupid.”

…

Well, now they've both been scolded. That enough to get it through their thick heads? Please let me know what you think in a review. Might just make my New Year.

Chapter 20

I'm so sorry! It's been so long! And this is such a skinny little update. But I will never abandon you, I promise. And posting a little is better than posting nothing. Hope to the heavens this writer's block evaporates soon, right?

…

"Look, I promised myself that I'd make you sort this out on your own. But honestly, Smerek." His sister calls him first thing the morning after The Second Interview. "You '*bet she looks ravishing in a Rangers jersey*'? I'm not even going to get into the fact that Dad and Nora saw that interview and I swear to god, the color purple they both turned—"

"Dad and Nora saw that?" Derek swallows. "I didn't think they'd actually air that. We didn't exactly, well, talk about hockey…"

"Yeah," Marti agrees emphatically. "If you weren't on the verge of tears that last time we spoke,"

"—Verge of tears?" Derek cuts in, and Martin continues speaking over him as if she hasn't heard, "I'd swear you were lying to me about breaking up to keep the 'rents off your back."

"I would never," Derek swears. "You'd weasel the truth out of me anyway."

"This is the last, *last* time I am ever getting involved, so listen closely: I would have smacked you clear across the face if you said things like that to me on national-international-television."

Derek fists a hand in his hair. Hell, if anyone ever spoke to Marti like that, he'd slap them. "Your violent tendencies aside, what does that have to do with my situation?"

"Casey didn't smack you. Somewhere, some part of her… Listen, the girl is clearly head over heels if she couldn't even muster up the gall to be outraged."

"I think she was plenty outraged. You didn't see how she walked out after they shut off the cameras."

"No, Derek. I'm done talking about it."

"Fine." He clears his throat. "So, uh, Dad and Nora. Did they, uh, say anything?"

"Oh god," His sister whines, but Derek knows she can't wait to tell him the story. 'Nora burst into hysterics immediately after they cut to commercial. *Georgie*,' Marti mimicks in a surprisingly accurate imitation of her step-mother. "*She's still in love with him.* God, Smer, she was wailing."

"I, uh… really?"

"Please, dude, I haven't even gotten to the best part yet." Marti snaps. "Dad is just kind of sitting there, totally stunned. Nodding along to whatever Nora's babbling. Then she goes

quiet. *It's been years. They haven't seen each other in years, and they still feel that strongly about one another?*"

Derek interjects, "I wouldn't go that far."

"Shut up! Then she says, and I swear to god: *Do you think we made a mistake, forcing them to separate?"*

Derek can feel his heart stop. It takes a full five seconds before he begins breathing again.

Marti continues over the pause. "And then Dad says, *Yeah. Yeah, I think we did.*"

Casey would be laughing. That kind of hysterical, seemingly endless, unbelievable gasping laugh thing that she does. Casey would be outraged. Derek curses. "Fuck them."

"Hey, better late than never, right?"

He shakes his head. "Barely."

There is silence over the phone line for several seconds. "So does that, uh, make you more determined," Marti laughs, "Or less?"

"I can't even-I can't talk about this right now, kiddo." His free hand is curled into a fist at his side.

"Oh," Marti backpedals quickly. "Hey, uh, listen. Don't let them ruin this for you. Please, please, Smerek. Don't use this as another excuse, I mean, it's your happiness. Please don't let this-don't do what you're thinking of doing just to spite them."

"Right." Derek grits his teeth. "I'll talk to ya later, Smarts."

…

Casey spends the rest of the night and most of the next morning stubbornly refusing to talk and or think about *The Second Interview*. She's even started to refer to it like that in her head, in italic title case.

During her (non) musings, Tom passes her cubicle and then doubles back. He leans on the edge of the wall. "Hear anything about that job yet?"

"Just had the interview. It went really well, but I haven't heard anything official yet, no."

Tom nods, "Well, I'm sure it'll all work out. Still going to MSG tonight for the game?"

Casey clenches her teeth, forcing a small smile onto her face. "Of course."

"Relax. There's no live interviews tonight. I would have been given the heads up by now."

"Small consolation," Casey admits.

"I don't know what to tell you, McDonald, hockey brings out the best in your writing."

"I could start writing badly." Casey says it like it's a joke, but she's really only halfway kidding.

Tom shakes his head, drumming his fingers across the top of her cube. "You and I both know you won't do that."

“Yeah.” Casey nods. “Yeah, I know.”

“Chin up. The season’s almost over.” He grins at her and the turns into his office at the end of the hallway.

…

At MSG, She sees Derek sauntering towards her out of the corner of her eye. Casey holds up her hand. “Can we not?”

“Not what, princess? Make eyes at one another on live television?”

“Derek,” her sigh is heavy. “I don’t want to-I’m just going to go up to the press box and-and ignore you.”

“Ignore me?” Derek steps into her space. “Can’t imagine that would make you a very good journalist—ignoring your charge.”

“Worked like a charm last time.” She feels her lips quirk into a lopsided smile. Then she has to consciously step back from him. She is not supposed to engage. Derek has has all of thirty-five seconds in her space and already he’s mucking her very carefully laid plans.

Pointedly, Derek does not move closer to her in order to make up for the space she placed between them. He traces his eyes from her cheekbones to her toes and then back up to meet her gaze.

Casey flushes, and clenches her fists.

His smile is dangerous.

Casey suppresses a sigh, “I’m just going to—”

“You look nice today.” Suddenly he looks earnest. He shifts his weight to the other foot.

Casey blinks. “I, uhm. Thank you?” She clears her throat. “Thanks.”

Derek grins. “I am being sincere, you know.”

She feels herself deflate; Casey nods slightly, “Good luck today.”

“Thank you,” he says. “I’m sure I’ll be great.” Derek smiles, and it reaches his whole face. Then he turns and disappears into the locker room.

…

Derek plays spectacularly, though she’ll never be so effusive in print. He scores twice and assists on the winning goal. In the press conference post game, the media clamors for him and he answers questions with the same bravado he always does. Once, after a particularly cocky answer, he meets Casey’s eyes and he blinks slowly. No one else would have noticed; Casey knows he’s rolling his eyes and doesn’t want anyone to see.

No one asks about his lucky charm. Casey hates that she notices the absence of that particular line of questioning.

Next to her, a reporter asks for an update on how Derek is enjoying being in New York.

Derek looks directly at her when he answers. “It’s starting to finally feel like home.”

Casey's skin warms and she feels as if she can't bear to hold his gaze, so she forces herself to look away.

Then he thanks the press and walks off the podium, straight into the crowd of journalists gathered at his feet. Behind him, their goalie takes the mic. But Casey barely notices the defenseman because Derek is headed straight for her.

He leans in when he reaches her and threads his fingers into hers. "Will you comes to Wes' on Saturday? For the party?"

It takes a second for her brain to catch up. Kate had mentioned something about a party, hadn't she? And Casey thinks she scoffed at her friend in annoyance before promising to go.

"Uhm, yeah," Casey stammers. "I promised Kate. Unless-you don't mind?"

"Not at all." He presses a kiss into her forehead. "See you Saturday." And for the second time that night he walks away, leaving her completely speechless.

…

Love to those of you still reading. Let me know how all about how I need to update more frequently in the reviews. I love hearing from you.

Chapter 21

"So, can I tell you something?" Derek leans against the island in Wes' kitchen while Casey resets platters of cheese and various unrecognizable finger foods.

"Something tells me that even if I say no, you're gonna do it anyway." Her words are cutting, but the way she meets his eyes, smiling up at him, is entirely soft. A peace offering of sorts.

"I talked to Marti after that last interview. You know, the one where—"

"I know the one," Casey says, pushing the closest platter away from her with more force than necessary. A handful of cheese cubes tumble off the pyramid in the middle. "And?" she prompts.

"The fam was all watching the game together." Derek steps closer. Hip to hip, they lean up against Casey's workspace with their arms folded. Tucked away from the party, the kitchen pulses in almost-silence. Derek shoves his hands in his pockets, rocking on his heels. "Apparently Nora regrets pushing us apart. She thinks we're inevitable."

Next to him, Casey forgets how to breathe.

"Dad agreed. Marti thinks the whole thing is hysterical—you know, in that way that it's really not. No word yet from either Ed or Liz, but I suppose you'd hear from Liz first since—SpaceCase?"

Casey has started shaking, literally vibrating, swinging her head back and forth and she's muttering under her breath.

"Are you—? Use your words now." He moves to stand in front of her, two hands on her shoulders to steady her.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" She looks at Derek, pleading fury in her eyes. "Who does she think she—why hasn't she—are you—no. No."

Derek chuckles. "Sort of exactly my reaction," he says. He moves his hands to her waist, steps his toes in between hers.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it's our family and I—" Derek fights a grimace off his face. He won't look at her. Even still, Casey watches as he loses the battle. He touches the ends of her hair, working the strands between his forefinger and thumb. "I can't deal with it alone."

Casey looks up at him. The corners of her eyes are pricked with tears. "I can't deal with it at all." She extricates herself from his grip with an apology. "I should really bring these plates out."

Derek follows at her heels, helping to carry two extra platters without her even having to ask.

…

Casey stands in the middle of the party fray, trying to forget. She can still feel the press of Derek on her hips, his quiet voice, that blasted admission of I-can't-deal-with-it-alone.

How dare they? Casey seethes. If her mother really wanted to make amends, she'd come out and say that to her face. Fly a plane to New York on her knees and beg. The years they've wasted. The time.

She has spent so much energy being nervous, agonizing, throwing up excuses as to why not because it all made her feel safe. But this? She's not safe, she's missing out.

Across the crush of the party, Derek catches her eye. He's wrapped up in the attentions of some puck bunny, pin-straight hair, mythic raccoon eyes with heavy, doting lashes. She has thin hands like feathers on his shoulders. And he looks at Casey, eyes huge as hers and pleading, *get me away from her—I can't.* Casey smiles, blows him a kiss. He chokes on it, brushing it off his lips when it lands, grinning—smiling huge—the girl oblivious to the whole thing. Casey nearly doubles over in the force of her laughter.

She tried being happy without him and for a while she was okay. But now that he's back, what is okay when being with Derek, even just flirting with Derek, thrusts her whole life into technicolor?

Derek is back to mouthing messages at her in desperation, the girl showing him things on her phone, looking up at him in between the flicking of her thumbs. His smile at her is plastic-wrap tight. His lips for Casey say '*save me, save me.*'

Casey walks through the crowd, parting like morning-glory petals in the dew. She sidles up to Derek, slips her hand in his back pocket. She bypasses the girl, her voice fuchsia-bright, "Der-bear, I've been looking for you everywhere!" she nuzzles his cheek, kisses the corner of his mouth before she directs her attention to the girl.

"Sorry to interrupt, I'm Casey."

They fumble around their drinks trying to shake each other's hands. And the girl probably shares only a handful of words before she gets the message and pretends she's been called away.

"Thank you," Derek says as soon as the girl is out of earshot. He steps back, out of Casey's space. "Really. You're a lifesaver."

Casey takes his hands, pulling him back. "Ask me again."

Here in the centerpiece of the party, they are pressed together close. Casey's heart beats across the inch that separates them, like a plea.

Derek blinks, "What?"

"That day in the apartment. The ridiculous bachelor pad with the windows." Her whole body is pressed up against his, her lips near the shell of his ear. The music thumps up against them. Her heart is fast in the trap of her chest.

Derek nods, "Yeah?"

“You were going to ask me to move in with you.” Casey steps back, better to look him in the eye.

And Derek can’t hear her, not really, not the way he wants to when she kind of smiles and says, “Ask me again.”

He digs his hand into his pocket, a smirk tugging gently at the corners of his lips. He leans in, chest to chest so that she can hear him clearly. Derek presses something into her waiting hand, locking his fingers with hers around his gift. “It’s a good thing I had these made then.” He pulls back. His grin is full. “Do you want to come and see? They won’t miss us here.”

Struck still, Casey runs her thumb along the edges, feeling metal and the jagged edge of teeth. The two keys are warm with promise in her palm. When she looks up, the front door is closing on Derek’s back. She starts forward, following Derek out onto the front steps. “Where?”

“A few blocks; ten-minute walk.”

Casey pitches forward, rocking on her heels. “What are we waiting for?” She steps out the front gate, standing on the sidewalk, cold, but too excited to go back for her coat. “Which way?”

“Left,” he says, and then it begins.

…

He walks two paces ahead of her the entire time, while she peppers him with questions he answers by laughing.

The house—*house!* Casey effuses—is set back from the sidewalk with ten steps leading up to the front door. Sweeping Brownstone walls and three stories of bay windows. She wraps her fingers around the wrought iron railing and tries not to swoon. Casey steps with her back to the front door, looking down the steps at Derek. Her palms are flat against the mahogany and slowly, Derek rests his hands on her hips.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I know.” He twists his own key in the lock. And then, right hand still on her, he asks, “Ready?”

When she nods, Derek leans in and slowly, kisses her through the doorway. And she’s torn, with her back against the bannister, between seeing the house and his fingers in her hair, down her back, tucked inside her pockets. She pulls away slightly, pressing her mouth along the line of his neck just below his ear. But she is tense, her muscles long and clenched in excitement and nerves. Casey can’t decide where to put her hands and she flits between his shoulders and the small of his back, Derek’s biceps and the crest of his hipbones.

Derek steps back consciously, stills her hands in his larger ones. “You feel like an octopus. Relax, you can—we have—if you’ll give it to me, well—” he smiles, can’t look her in the eye to finish his sentence. Derek, bashful, is such a sight. “We’ll have the rest of our lives.”

Casey lets out all of her breath at once. “You bought us a house—”

“—Excuse me, I bought myself a house, I have just—”

Casey dangles her keys in front of his face.

"—Offered you my spare keys, you know, in case I lock myself out—"

"Derek," she snaps. 'There are so many things to see. You and,' she dips her two fingers into his front pocket, tugging him back into her space, "You and the whole house and I'm coming to realize how much time I've wasted making other people happy. It's just a lot. I want everything *now.*"

Derek holds out his arms.

"So maybe if you just—" She slips her hands up underneath his shirt and begins to unbutton it, "take this off, and give me a naked tour…" Casey laughs. "Then we can do two things I want at once."

Derek stares at her as she pushes his shirt from his shoulders. When she starts to ruck up the tee underneath, he scoops her up and carries her to the second floor.

"Living room, second bedroom," he lists, swiveling her around presumably so that she can see the space. But her nose is pressed into the small of his back, his arms around her knees, she can't see squat.

"Derek," she protests, drawing her finders up his sides, squeezing where she knows he's ticklish.

"Casey," he answers, squirming.

"I can't see anything."

"You'll see what's important."

Which is when he rounds the stairs to the top level. Derek deposits her, gently, to the floor. There is a small landing and then a door. Outside of the master suite, her back up against the bannister again. Derek in his teeshirt, the V at his clavicle, the flutter of the hemline at his hip bones. She runs a hand, a few fingers down the center of his chest, stops below his navel and, "Can we just—I really, just. Want to see." She steps out of the circle of his arms and reaches out for the door to the bedroom. Derek follows.

…

It takes over the entire floor. Up until now, the rooms have been empty, left entirely undecorated. He has a handful of glasses and a set of dishes in the kitchen, but other than that, the walls echo with the emptiness of their home.

Derek watches her make directly for the windows alongside the bed, the only piece of furniture he's put in the entire house yet. It is a wide, ridiculous thing, California King and plush with pillows and an indulgent duvet. The room is shrouded in moonlight, silhouetting Casey agains the window and for a moment, his breath slows. he's afraid to believe they are here.

"So?" he prompts, leaning against the doorjamb, arms cross and with one ankle tucked behind the other. "Do keep in mind that you haven't seen your closet yet."

Casey is smiling when she turns around. “Don’t think it hasn’t escaped my attention that the only piece of furniture in this entire place is a bed. What are you expecting, Derek?”

“A good night’s sleep,” he says, and doesn’t move off the door frame.

Casey walks to the side of the bed closer to Derek. There is nothing between them now. “I was hoping for something else.”

He feels her like a hook around his solar plexus, reeling him in. The air is heavy. his pulse is slow. “Yes,” he breathes, and then his hands are one her hips.

And they stand close enough now that they don’t even have to speak. Their voices only sound with the force of the breath in their throats. And Casey says, “Are we really doing this?” even though her fingers tap dance along his rib cage, the musculature in his chest lined strong and sharp between his breaths.

“I’m doing this,” Derek says. he holds her full in his hands, cradles the small planes of her body between the breadth of his fingers. “Are you doing this?”

Casey takes her two fingers up to his lips, ends with her thumb and cups his cheek. “I think I’m in love with you.”

“You think?” Derek steps back, holding her at arms length. He speaks fully now, his voice at a normal volume. ‘You think? *Okay?*’ He topples her backwards onto the bed, followers her onto the pillows, settling straddled across her hips. “Do I have to be the bigger person here?”

Derek knows what she is feeling, but her wants her to say it, because he needs to know she believes it.

…

He is stunning are argumentative and everything she never dreamed of for herself. But pinned beneath him on this bed, in this house he bought for them, looking up at his smirk and fluff of hair, she gets it. He’s not perfect, he’s not even perfect for her, but he’s real. They are real.

“I’m in love with you.” Casey says, but before all of the words are out of her mouth, they are kissing, deep, sitting in each other’s space and moving—frantic, slow—until Casey has got him pressed up against the headboard, her thighs open around his lap. Her hands up under his shirt and her face slack with the awe of his presence.

Casey has hated hockey in every moment except this one. It broke him and left her heart on ice. But it brought them back together, delivered him to her bed—their bed in this bright and hopeful room—all skate strong and toned. She drags her hands upward, lets her fingers touch everything, all of his sharp lines and hard naked skin that thrums the pulse though her veins.

He leans forward and she tears his shirt off, all fingernails along his back, desperate breaths. Derek kisses her then, drowning. Casey’s heart strains just below her skin. There is an unbearable tease in the way her shirt separates them. She feels like all of her senses are concentrated where ever they touch, but there is too much fabric, just miles of it. She reaches

for her hemlines. And Derek groans like even seconds apart are seconds too many. He flips them, “Let me do it.”

And then, with her head in the cloud of pillows, he licks wet lines up her torso, between her breasts, over the spread of her collarbones. Casey writhes under him. She pops the snap of her jeans, disentangles herself from her top, presses the bow of her hips to his in such a way that she loses her breath.

She moans his name, heady. “Fuck, oh my god.”

“Its Derek, just Derek.”

And god, fuck him for still being able to be clever when every part of her body is focused on the sweet heat of his skin where it touches her.

“What the fuck was I doing all this time,” she babbles.

His fingers trace the lace edges of her underwear, purple like her bleeding heart.

“Thinking I didn’t—ah—want you.”

He peeks up at her from between her legs, blown pupils—stupid, infuriating, egotistical, incredible, incredibly perfect smirk at his lips, so close to hers. Casey mews for him. Derek doesn’t even have to voice it, so he doesn’t.

And Casey rolls her eyes, rolls her entire head, nudges his cheek with her thigh. She reaches out for him, sitting up and pushing him back, her hands on his face and his chest and Casey smiles. “Yes, Derek.” Hand on the center of his chest, she straddles him, her panties forgotten and she pulls his briefs out of the way before teasing him at her entrance, her first tight around the base of him. “I need you, okay?”

Derek presses inside of her and they come close. Derek wraps himself around her, all hot warm skin. He kisses Casey, uses teeth on her bottom lip, sucks it into his mouth.

Their pace is torturous. They spend long moments pressed into one another until Casey moans, fists her hand into his hair at the back of Derek’s skull. Derek works faster then, and Casey keens, holding onto him with her nails. She curses in a stream and begs, “Yes, there. Keep—” She can’t get close enough. Until everything is happening all at once and Casey is coming all around him, the motion of her hips slowing, but not stopping.

Derek grips those hips and holds her to him.

“Fuck,” she says, “I can’t stop.”

“Then don’t.”

And its only a few seconds then, before her skin is alight, the slide of their bodies together and the places his nails bite into her skin. Casey can’t breathe enough air to keep up with her breath. He fucks into her tight heat, filling her in places she didn’t know where empty.

“I think—oh my god, *fuck*, Derek. I think—” Her whole body shakes around him, their hips snap together frantically. Her words dissolve into moaning.

“Come on, Case, yes. Hold on. I want to make you come again, please. Don’t stop.”

She loses everything with the second one, screaming—her whole body bowstring tight, the waves of it crash through her with the force of a hurricane. Deep inside, she feels him follow her, and she tries to watch his face, but can't possible manage her eyes open.

Coming down, she pants, keens, octopus tight around him, and Derek collapses, hands falling from her back, her breasts, fingers light on her knees, head in the pillows, he grins, exhausted.

Casey sighs, "Fuck, Derek." She steadies herself with a hand on his chest until she falls beside him, "I—"

"No," he hushes, "No more talking, we'll freak out later, okay?"

Casey nuzzles into his side. "I was just going to invite you to have a shower with me, but that can wait until later too."

…

Derek cracks open a single eye, and finds Casey staring up at him, her smile gentle and assured. So he's not on the rink, and he hasn't just won the cup, and she's not looking down at him from the stands, cheering. But this? Naked and exhausted and face to face with the only face he wants to see, this is better.

…

End

…

I hope you've enjoyed the ride. And thank you for coming along with me.

Epilogue forthcoming.

Epilogue

"You didn't tell me!" Marti pounds her small fists into Derek's back.

Derek, who is currently pressed forehead to forehead with her stepsister looking every bit like Casey is the reason he wakes up every morning.

They're at John F. Kennedy International airport, in the arrivals hall, surrounded on all sides by reuniting families and lovers and car servicemen holding up dry erase boards with scrawled-on names.

Derek steps out of Casey's space to face his actual sister. "Hey, Smarts. I'd like to introduce you to my girlfriend, Casey."

Casey sticks out her hand, all smirks—spitting image of Derek.

And Marti stares at Casey, silent for all of ten seconds before she makes a noise halfway between a squeal and a groan and launches herself into her step sister's arms. "I missed you—I can't believe—so much—I never thought this would—when did you two—how did it happen—no, god, don't be gross, I don't want details." She pulls back, wiping the corners of her eyes. "You fuckheads are making me cry."

"Smarti!" Derek shouts over Casey's snort of laughter.

Casey swoops back in and hugs Marti again. "I missed you too, kiddo."

"Do Ed and Liz know? Do the parents? Were you ever going to tell me? Is everyone keeping secrets from me? Am I the last to know?"

Derek smiles, "Of course not. You're the first."

Marti shuts her brother down with a hand held in front of his face. "I am not ready to speak to you until you apologize for keeping me in the dark."

"I thought this would be more—"

"My bags, Derek," Marti dismisses him. 'If you would be so kind? Casey and I have a lot of catching up to do.' Marti links her arm with Casey's. "Tell me everything," she gushes, "only not *everything*. Remember he is my gross older brother." Together, they walk out of the airport, Derek trailing behind, fuchsia suitcase and all.

…

They give Marti the tour of the house, now fully decorated— "You know, when Derek sent me pictures, I wondered why it looked so nice…"—and now the three of them picnic in the backyard, lounging under the afternoon sun.

Marti feels a sense of ease between them. Casey sits between Derek's legs, her back cradled against his chest. One of his hands holds his beer and the other soothes across her shoulder and down her arm. Marti honestly doesn't know if she's witnessed a moment between the two of them where they weren't touching.

They've asked her about school, listening to her rants about all of the same teachers they used to have and she sees Casey and Derek share little private smiles every time Marti mentions a familiar name.

When Nora calls to find out if Marti arrived safely, Marti is surprised to learn that her stepmother and Casey have begun to repair their relationship. Casey chats amiably with her mother for a few minutes before hanging up the phone and dropping it beside them on the picnic blanket.

"So I am the last to know!" Marti accuses.

Derek smiles. "We thought it would be more fun this way."

"Sorry, Marti. You know this was all your brother's idea!" But Casey addresses the last half of her apology at Derek rather than Marti.

"Oh, Case, come on. Don't make it worse by lying to her now."

"Derek!"

For a moment, they are lost looking at one another before Marti interrupts: "You know I can't even be mad at the two of you when you're being that cute. Stop it."

Derek looks up, cheeks flushed, and Casey allows a small smile.

"I'm not cute," Derek pouts.

"You're adorable, D," Casey says and she looks up, presses a kiss to the underside of his jaw before she stands up, checking her watch for the time.

"Where do you think you're going?" Derek traces her wrist.

"I'm teaching my first class tonight," Casey rolls her eyes, but she smiles. "I've only reminded you a thousand times."

"I know. But I like you. Marti and I will miss you."

"I'll be back before your bedtime, you big baby, don't you worry. Marti, don't let him have dessert before dinner."

"Hey! I'm the one in charge here," Derek protests.

Marti grins. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

Casey laughs as they devolve into bickering and disappears into the house to gather her things.

…

Doing the dishes, Derek and Marti are on the brink of full on water warfare by the time Casey walks out the front door to catch the subway to Manhattan.

The second the door closes behind her, Derek calls a truce and all but drags Marti upstairs to the office space on the second floor.

"Sit." He places her in Casey's swiveling sky blue excuse for an office chair. "I have something to show you." Then Derek gets on his hands and knees and sticks he head inside

the lower cabinet of the messier side of the desk. When he emerges, he arranges himself cross-legged on the floor in front of Marti and places a small black box on her knee.

"For me?" Marti opens it, revealing a glittering diamond engagement ring. 'Smerek, you know I am your biological sister, right? It's one thing if you want to date your stepsister, but asking me to marry you is hardly appropriate— "but then Marti stops, drops the sarcasm off her voice and she whispers," Oh my god, *Derek*!' She catapults off the chair, wrapping her arms octopus around her brother's neck, the ring box clutched tightly in her fist. "When are you asking her? Will I still be here?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

The corners of Derek's mouth lift up, like he's trying to suppress a smile he just can't forbid. "Saturday."

Marti squeals, tackling him afresh. "Oh my god, oh my god, *ohmygod*," she effuses.

"I was going to do it when we're at the park in the morning. Dad and Nora are flying in for the weekend. So I thought I would surprise her with them too, made lunch reservations—"

"Oh my god, *Smerek!* Do they know?"

He nods, the grin taking over his whole face.

"And?"

"I mean, they're flying here this weekend, aren't they?" Derek meets Marti's gaze. "Nora cried when I invited them. She and Casey have started talking again—you know. They both really miss each other. Do you think it'll be okay? I don't want anything to be hostile for Casey."

"Smerek," Marti soothes. "It'll be fine. Casey picked you over them. And from what I know about how Nora feels, she's not going to jeopardize any opportunity to fix things with Casey. Not after last time."

"Do you think she'll say yes?"

"Would you be asking if you thought she'd say no?"

Derek smoothes his hands along his thighs. "Thanks, Smarts."

…

On Saturday morning in the Shakespeare Garden, Derek winks at Marti and gets down on one knee. Casey cries when she accepts his proposal. She almost can't stop wiping her eyes long enough to let him slide the ring into place. And then she flings both of her arms around Derek's neck and beckons for Marti to join in.

"I could not be happier that you're here to share this with us," Casey says, pressing Marti closer into the hug. "I can't wait to be a part of the family."

"Casey," Marti says, crying now. "Don't be stupid. You already are."

…

Later, when Derek walks her into a mom and pop diner in the east 70s for brunch, his hand on the small of her back and his ring on her finger, Casey dissolves into sobs when she sees her mom.

Nora tries to hug her and squeal and ogle the ring at the same time and in second they're both crying. They're making a scene—even George can't keep his eyes dry—and Casey looks happy, so happy.

Marti elbows Derek where they stand slightly offside from the carnage, "See? What did I tell you?"

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End

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Thank you, thank you, thank you again.